Dr. Kotnis in China

Dr. Dwarkanath Shantaram Kotnis was an Indian doctor who joined a medical mission bound for China to aid the Chinese people in their War of Resistance Against Japan in September 1938. During the five years of his stay in China, he treated thousands of wounded soldiers and civilians. He died of overwork and ill health at the battlefront, giving his life for the cause of China's national liberation. This book pays tribute to Dr. Kotnis's courage, revolutionary spirit, and internationalism.

Dr. Kotnis in China

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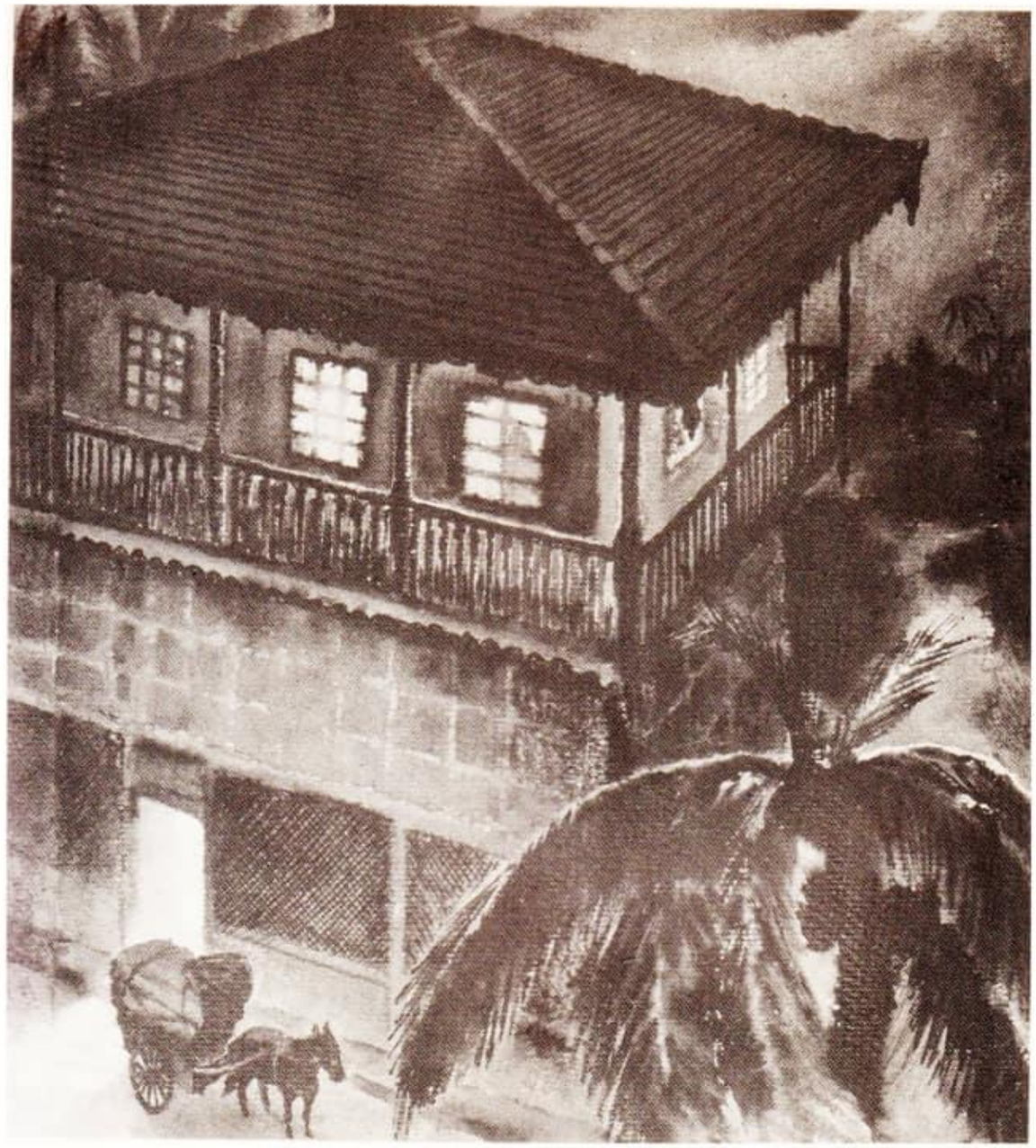
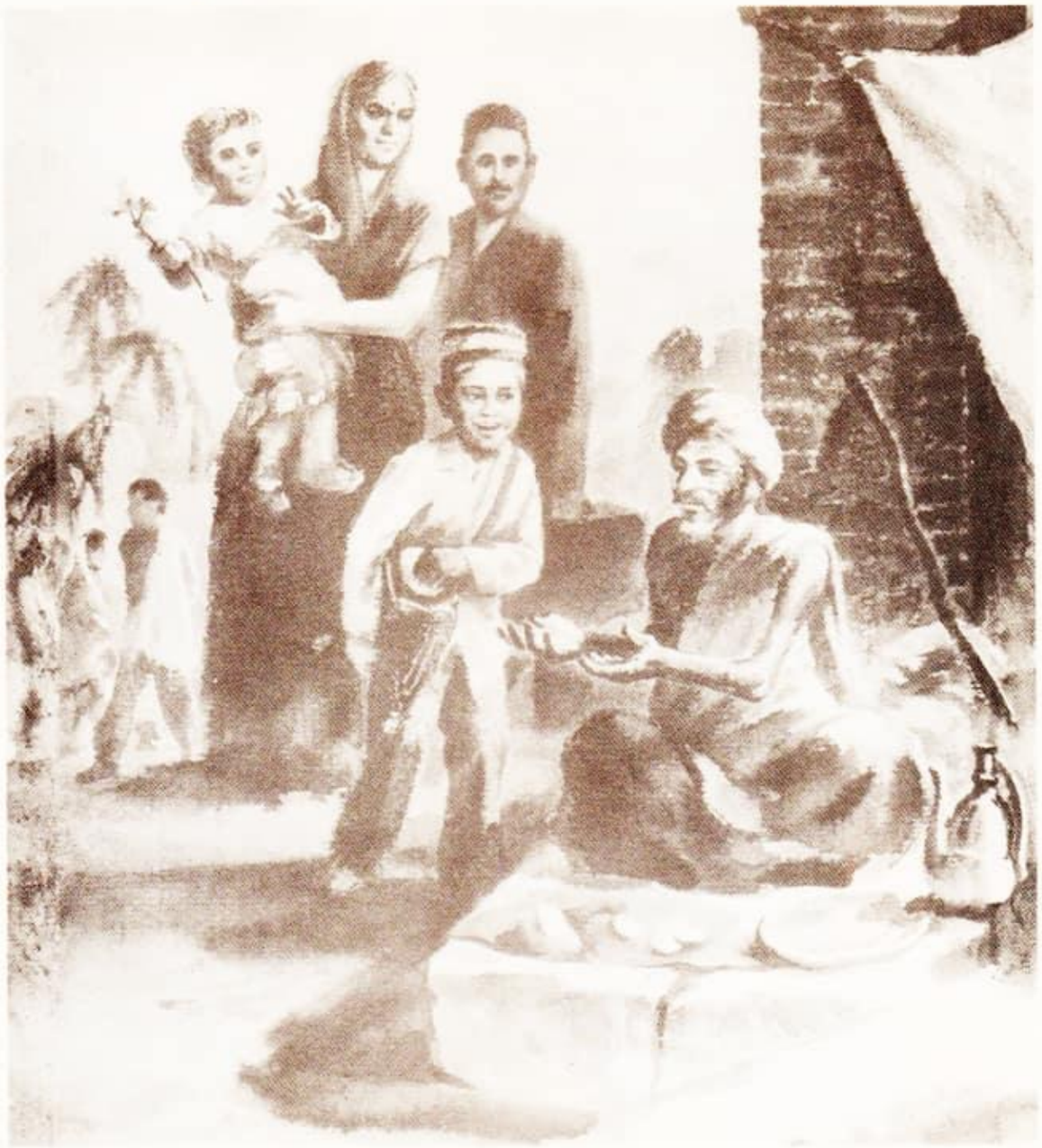


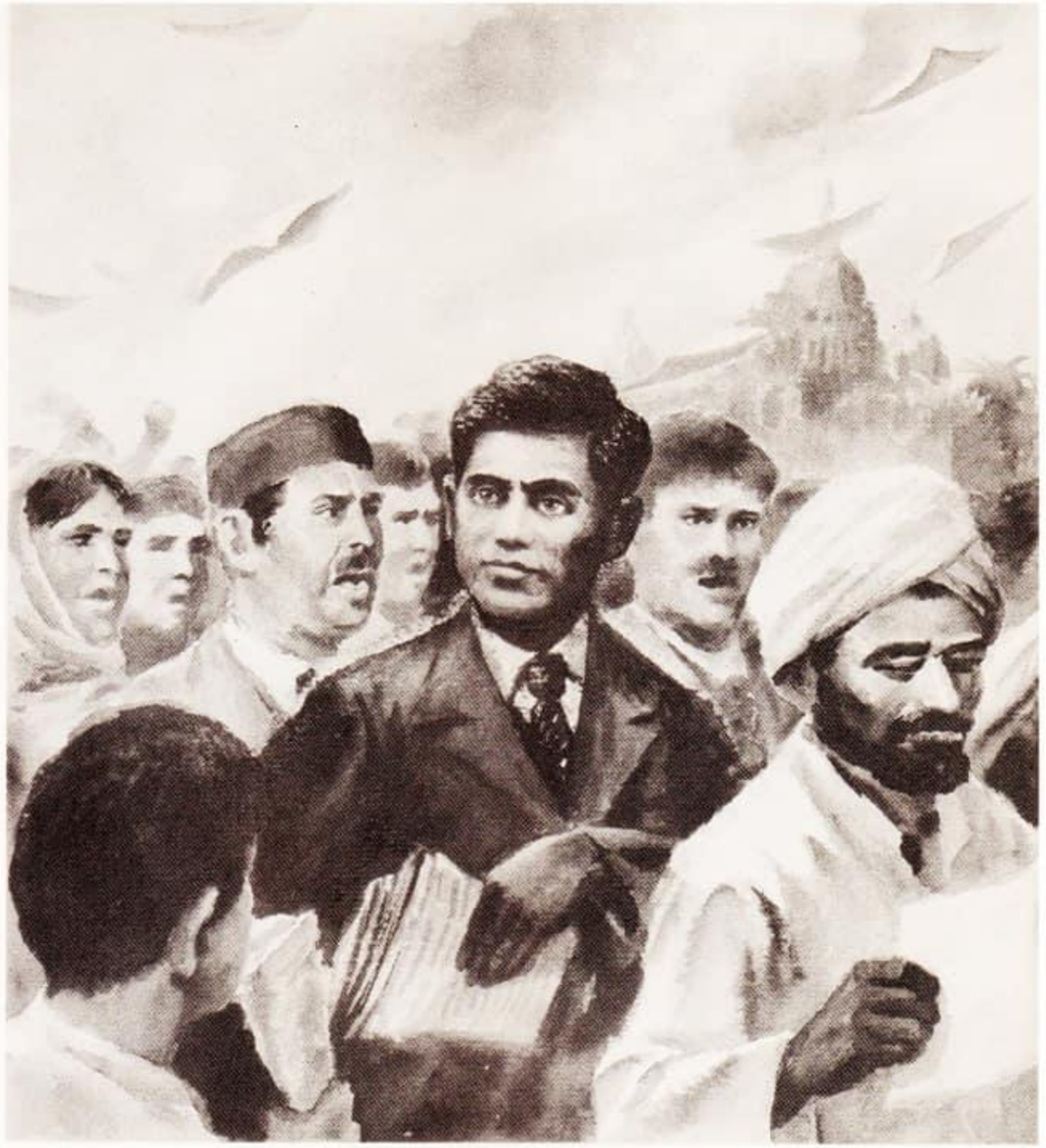
Late in the night of October 9, 1910, in Sholapur, a small town in southern India, the shrill wail of a newborn baby broke the stillness of the night, announcing the arrival of Dwarkanath Shantaram Kotnis.



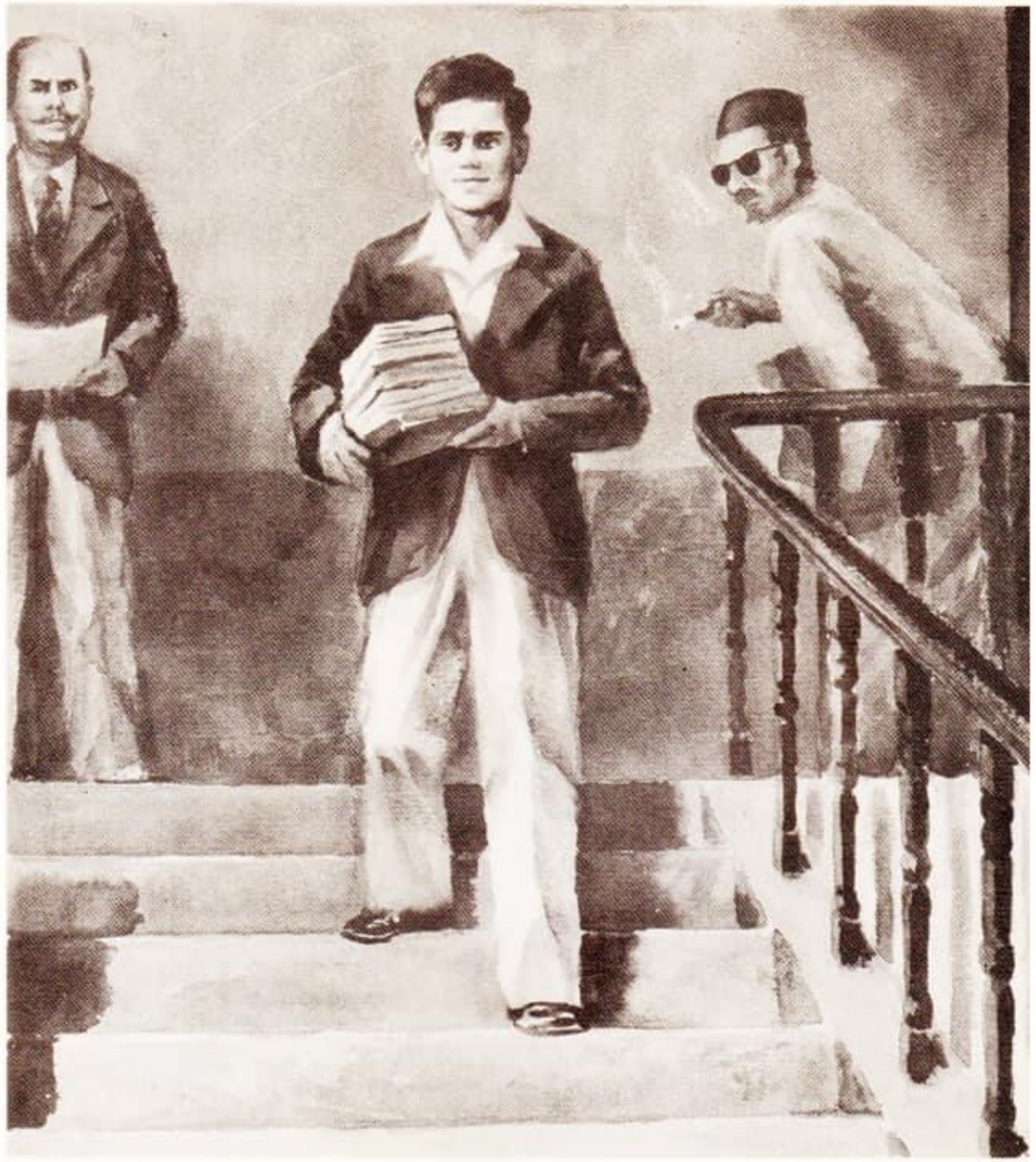
Young Kotnis came from a good family. His father, Shantaram Kotnis, served as a supervisor in a local cotton mill, and his mother was a virtuous housewife. Both of them were kind-hearted and educated their son to help the poor.

Under the influence of his parents, Kotnis cultivated good habits of helping others. One summer day, Kotnis and his cousin were sitting on the balcony when the cousin suddenly fell onto the roof of the neighbour's house. Without hesitation, Kotnis rushed forward, seized his cousin's hand, and saved him from falling off the roof.

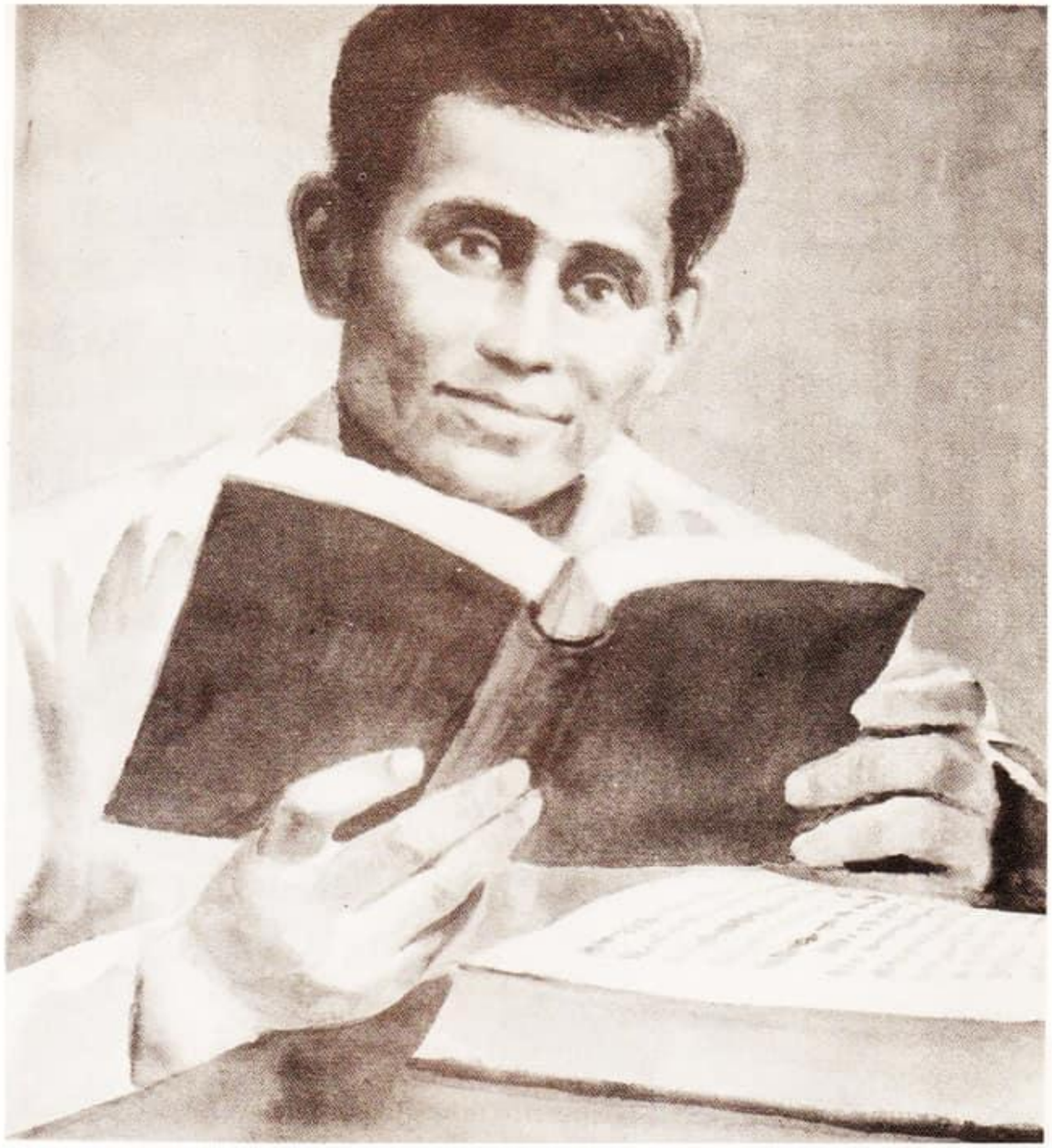
When Kotnis was in middle school, India was still a British colony. The boy supported the non-cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi and went with his father to a bonfire rally. From then, he only wore clothes made of Indian handwoven cloth.



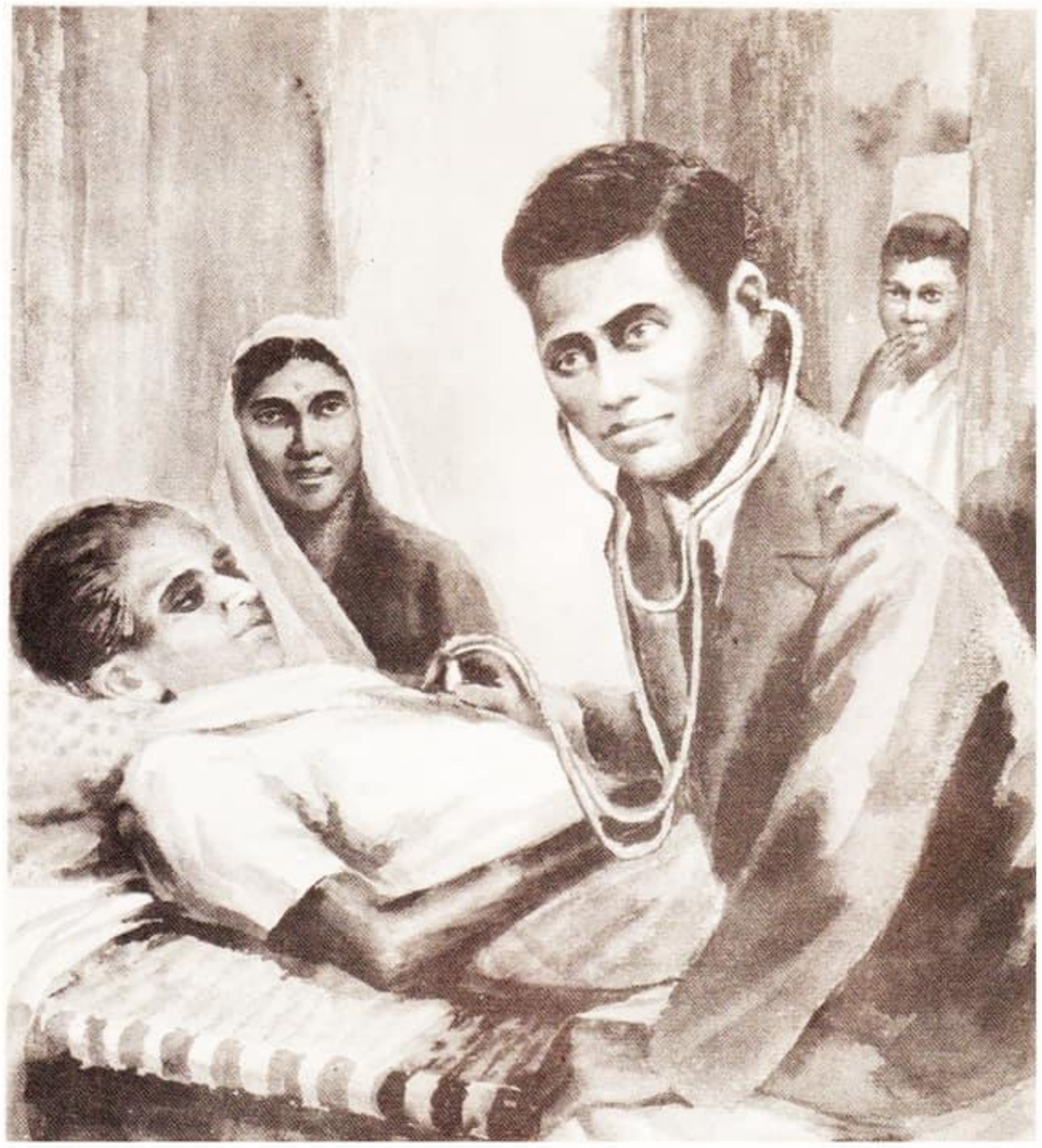
In 1932, when he was in college, some patriots were killed in his hometown by colonists. Kotnis was filled with indignation. Together with his fellow students, he staged a demonstration in protest.



When Kotnis refused to apologize for what he had done, he was ordered to quit school.



He was then admitted to Grant Medical College in Bombay, from which he graduated in 1936. His parents hoped that he would settle down and give some thought to marriage. But he wanted to continue his studies and become a surgeon.

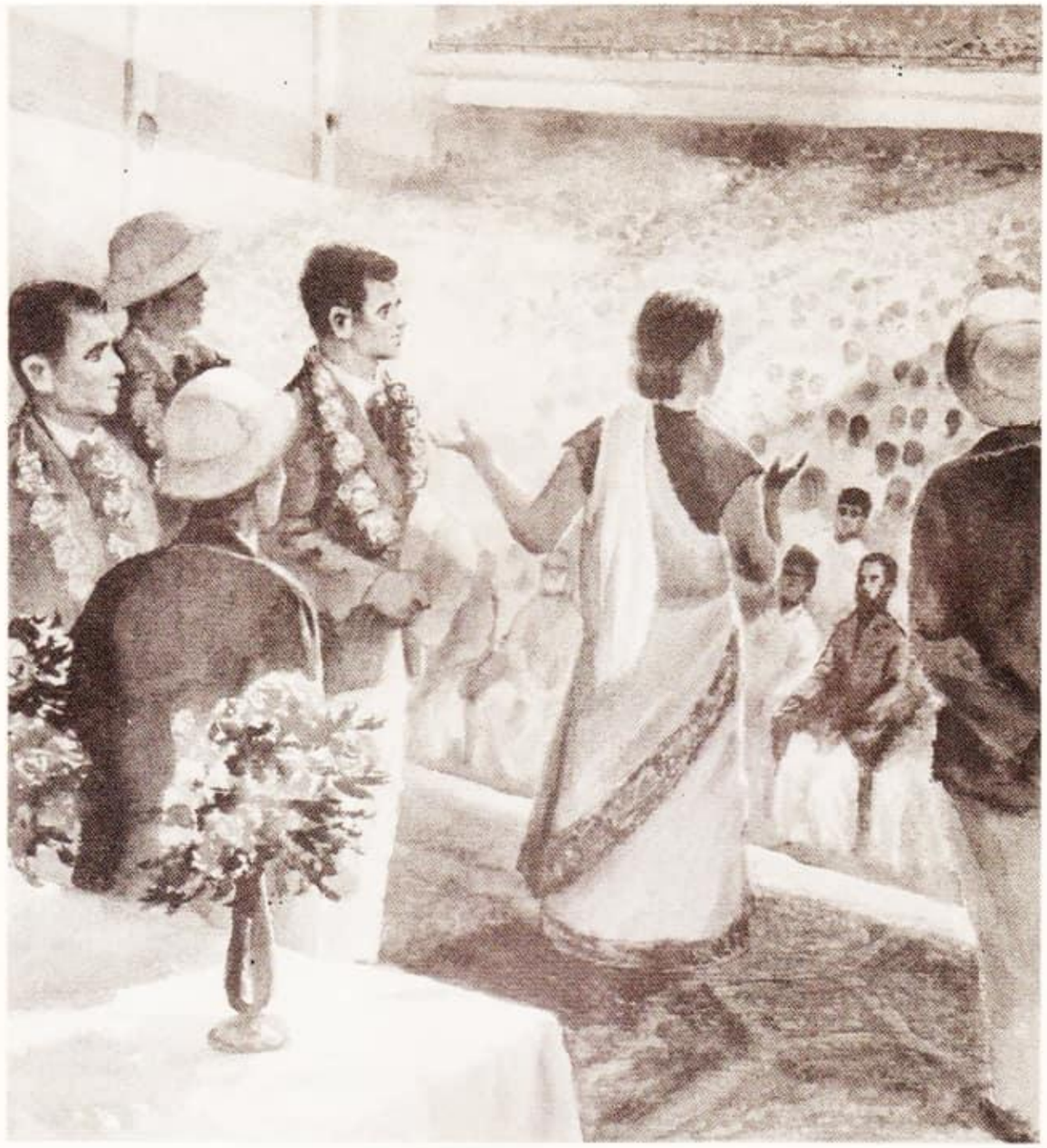


After graduation he was asked to stay on and became an assistant in physiology, which was considered a good job. But he was not satisfied with his work; he was shocked to find that the poor were suffering from disease because they couldn't afford medical care. He couldn't help asking himself, "Why?"

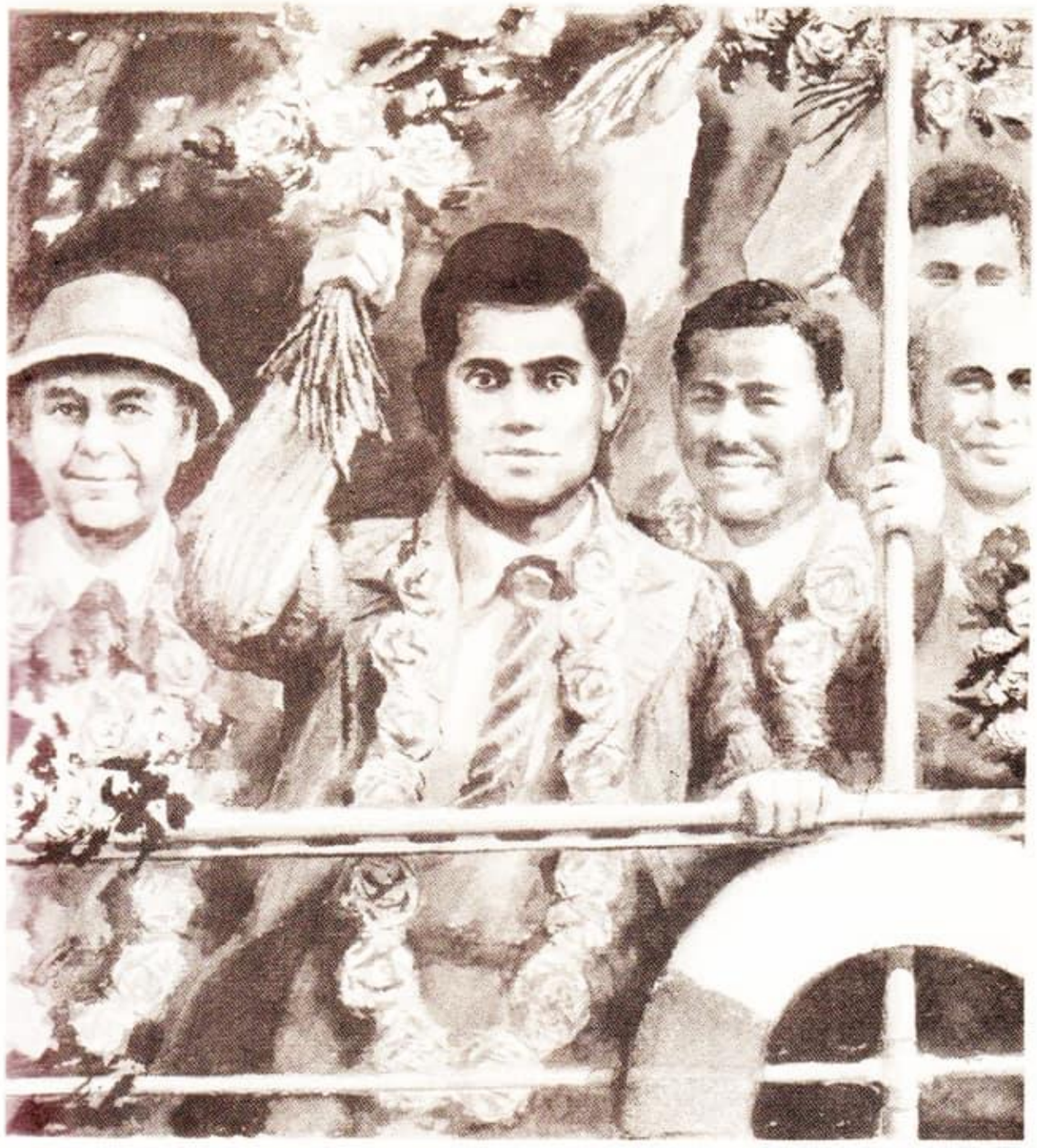
The date of the examination that would earn for him a higher degree was close. But just at that time, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Chairman of the Indian National Congress, called for the organization of a medical mission to support the Chinese people's anti- Japanese war. Kotnis decided to give up his long-awaited examination and presented his application to the China Aid Committee.

The chairman of the China Aid Committee advised him to consider carefully, because going to China meant risking his life and giving up higher studies. Kotnis replied in earnest: "This is my choice," and he was accepted.

Kotnis went back to his hometown, Sholapur, to say goodbye. Many people came to see him. Upon his departure, his father encouraged him: "Go forward with indomitable will, and don't give up halfway!" And his mother gave him a silver tumbler inscribed with the words: Never forget your mother.



At the mass rally held in Bombay to send the members of the medical mission off, workers, students, and other people from all ranks of life sang revolutionary songs, and shouted: "Indian people and Chinese people are brothers!1 Madame Sarojini Naidu, leader of the Indian National Congress, referred to the medical mission as ambassadors of the people. Kotnis was moved to tears.



At midnight, September 1,1938, the medical mission left Bombay on board the P. & O. liner S. S. Rajputana. There were five in all: Dr. M. Atal, leader of the mission;
Dr. M. Cholkar, deputy leader of the mission;
Dr. D. Mukerji; Dr. B. K. Basu; and Dr. D. S. Kotnis.

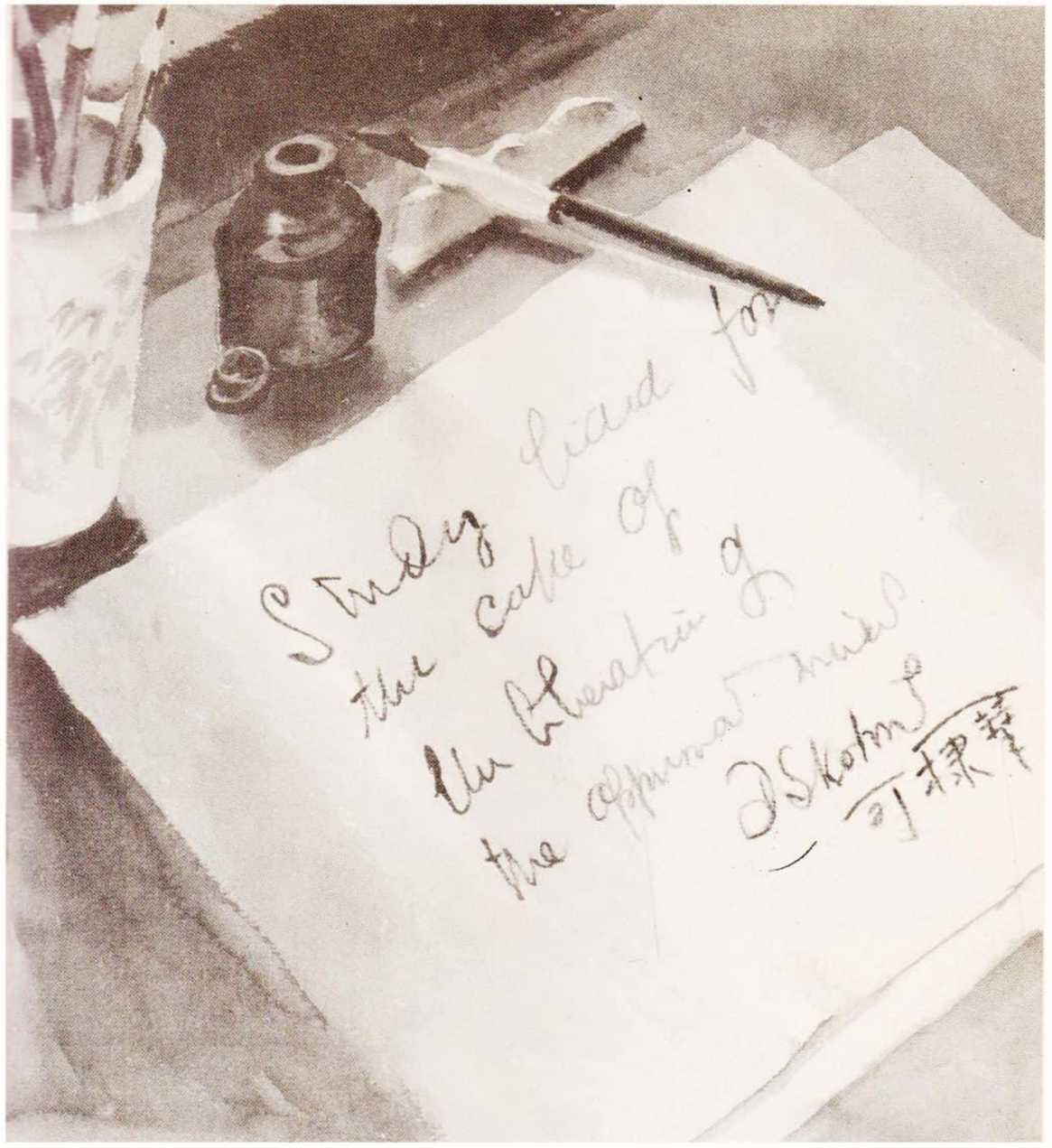
While the steamer was at sea, Kotnis filled a handbook with Chinese-English vocabulary words, and learned to sing the Chinese song "March of the Volunteers." That was how he acquired the nickname of "Scholar."

To prepare them for their future work, Kotnis volunteered to lead his comrades in military exercises, which he had learned at school. He took the drills seriously and was a strict teacher. Hence his second nickname, the "Colonel."

When the steamer arrived in Guangzhou seventeen days later, Madame Soong Ching Ling went to meet them. Dr. Atal said to Madame Soong in a low voice, "We want to go to Wuhan, because Zhou Enlai is there, and he will send us to the battlefront to join the Eighth Route Army." Kotnis, standing beside them, smiled.

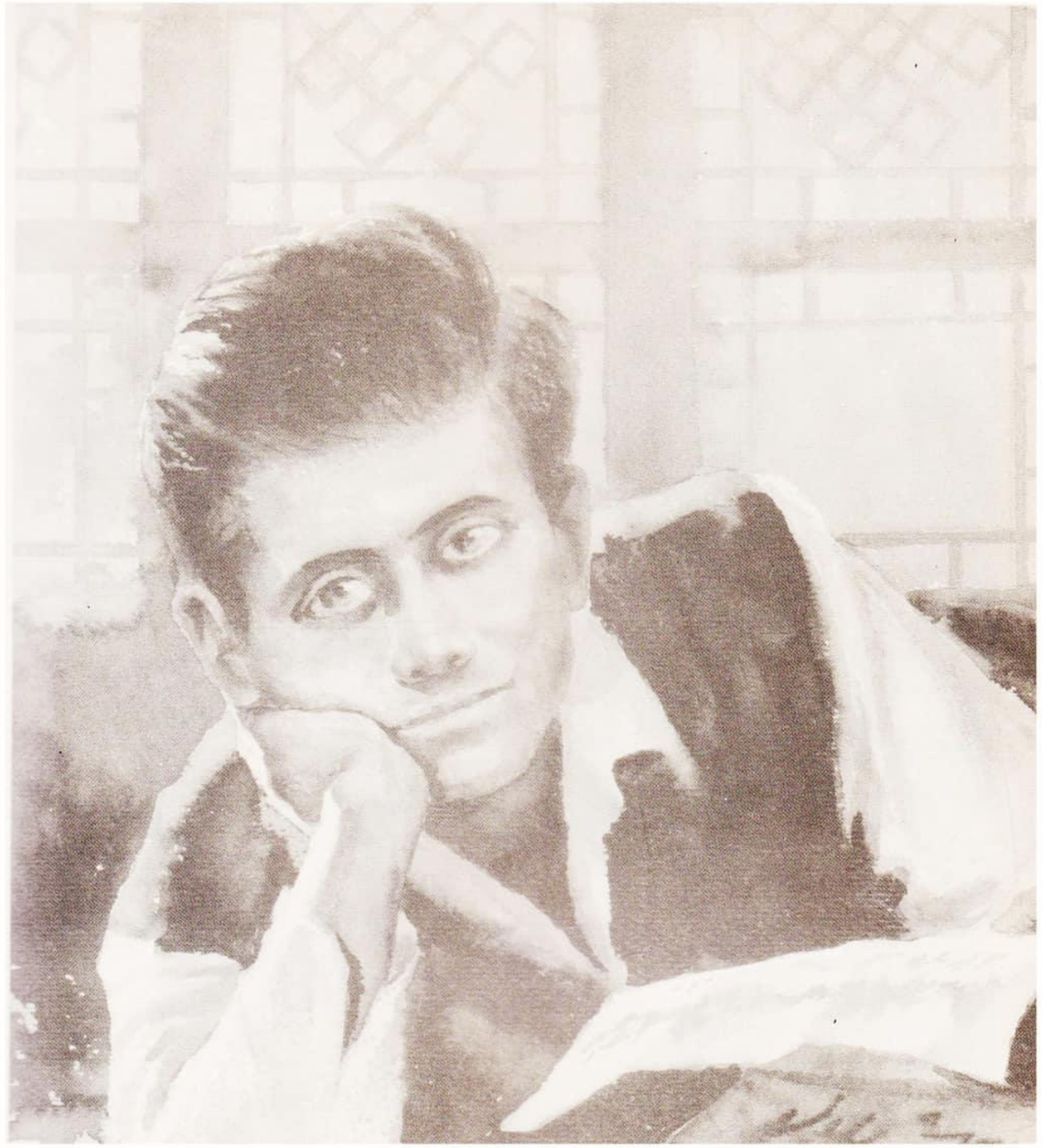
On October 7, 1938, Zhou Enlai, Vice-Chairman of the Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, received all the members of the Aid-China Medical Mission from India. Kotnis found Comrade Zhou Enlai was very affable. When learning that Kotnis was only twenty-eight years old, Zhou Enlai said humorously, "Then you can do much more work for friendly exchange between the Chinese and Indian peoples."

But Zhou Enlai would not agree to send them to the battlefront right away; he suggested they work in Chongqing under Kuomintang control for a while. This suggestion was quite beyond Kotnis's expectation.



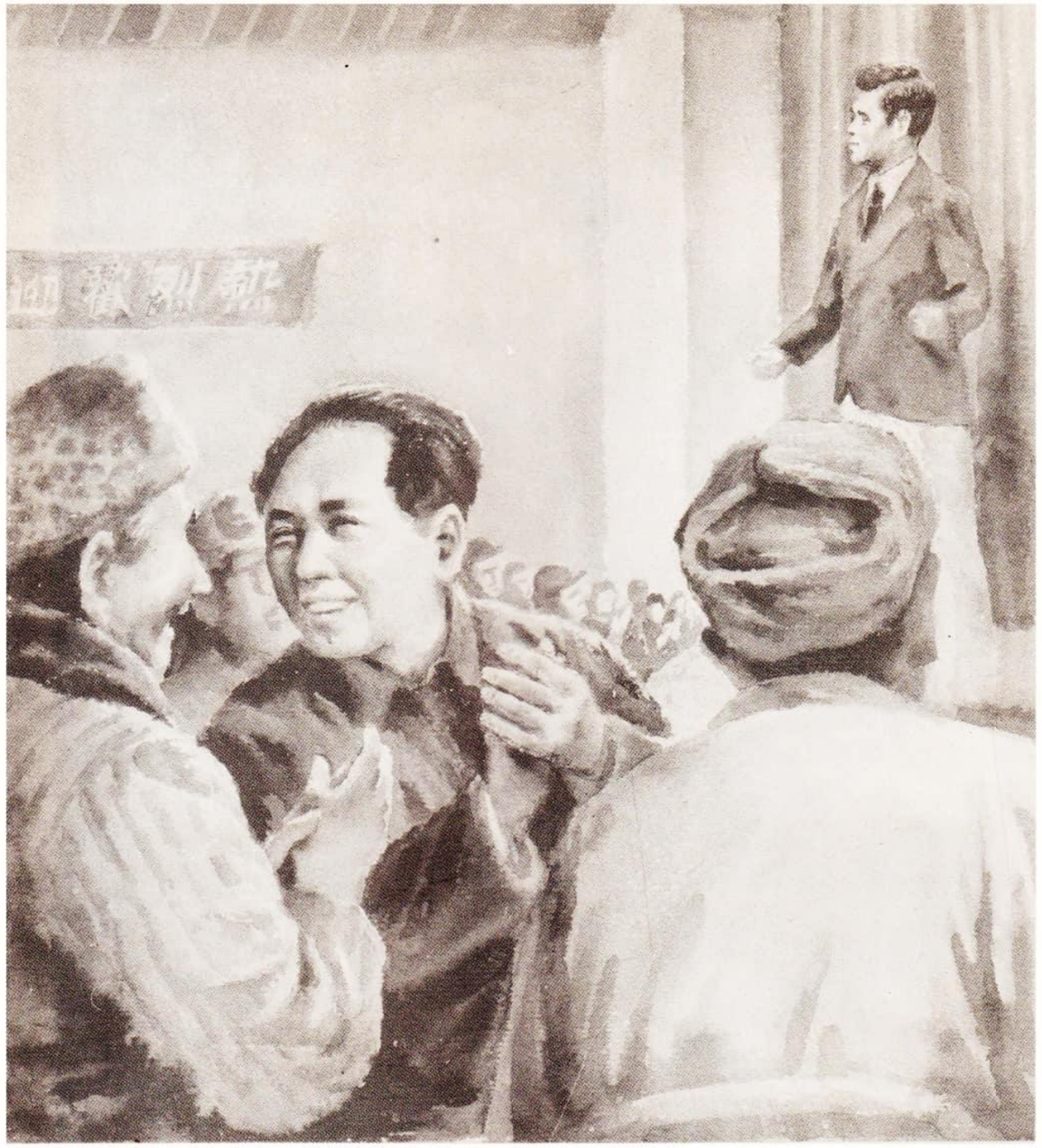
A few months later, Zhou Enlai arranged for members of the Indian Aid-China Medical Mission to leave Chongqing for Yan'an. Before they left, they all added *hua* meaning "China" after their names to show their love for China. Kotnis's Chinese name was Ke Dihua.

Kotnis was looking forward to the day of departure. In his letter to his father he wrote, "I hope that on this trip to North China I can see with my own eyes the new political force in the current world — Communism."

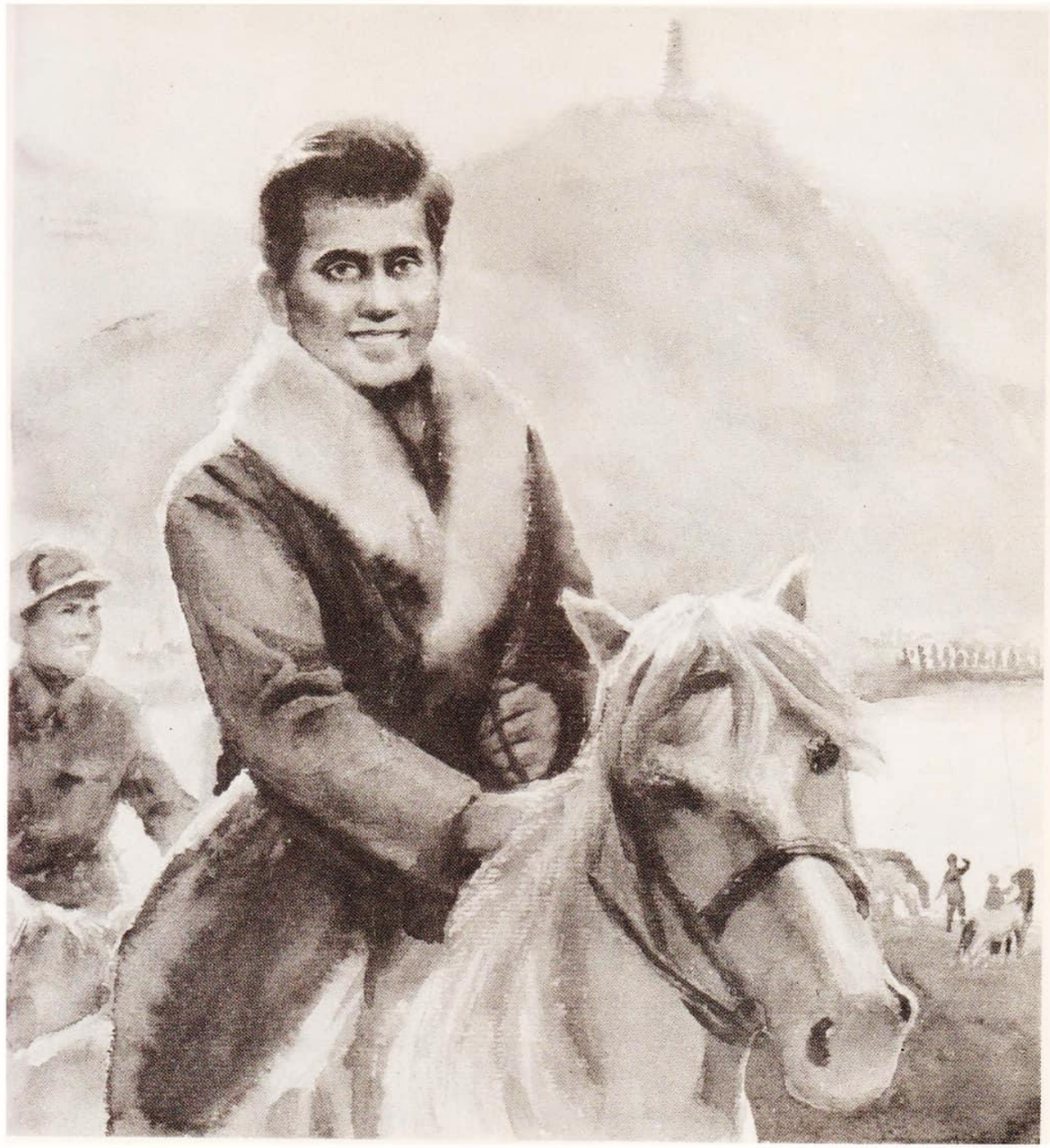


The day before they left for Yan'an, Kotnis received a letter from home, telling him the grievous news of his father's death. Choked with tears, he declined his colleagues' suggestion that he go back to India to attend his father's funeral. Because he still remembered his father's words: "Go forward with indomitable will, and don't give up halfway!"

On February, 1939, despite snow and an air raid, the people and soldier of Yanan gave these envoys of friendship from India a warm welcome with songs and dances.



On the third day of their arrival in Yan'an, a grand welcome meeting was held by the General Health Department of the Eighth Route Army. Kotnis went to the stage to sing "March of the Volunteers" in Chinese. He sang with great emotion and strength as if he would be going to the front to fight the enemy very soon. Also present was Chairman Mao Zedong, who couldn't help applauding.



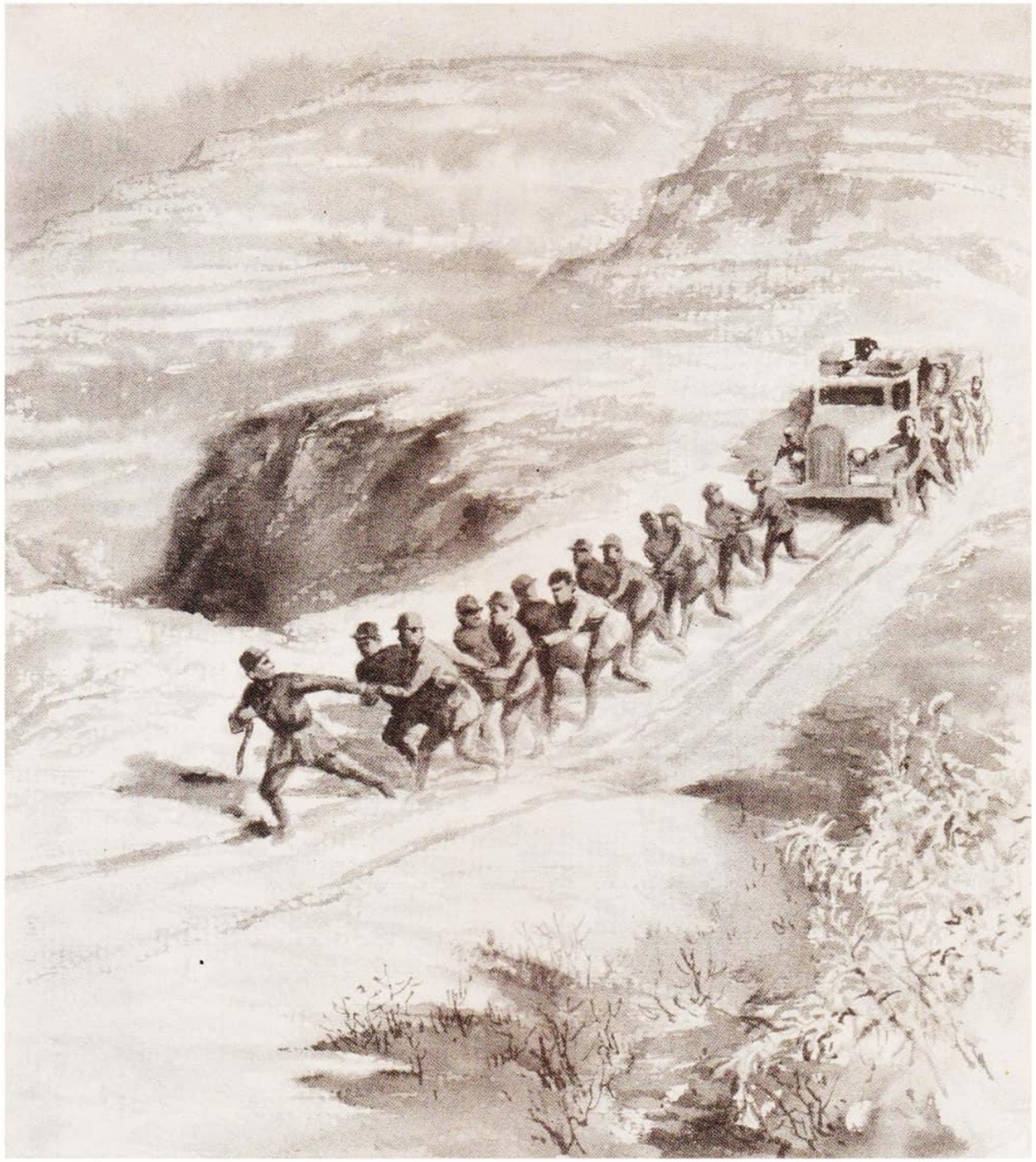
Not long after, Cholkar and Mukerji had to go back to India because of their health. Kotnis, greatly encouraged by the revolutionary atmosphere of Yanan, asked to go to the front in North China with Atal and Basu.

Owing to the enemy's intensified blockade, Kotnis and his colleagues had to work instead in an Eighth Route Army Hospital, 15 kilometres away from Yan'an. Kotnis worked as a surgeon and also as a radiologist.

One rainy night in July, Atal, Kotnis, and Basu received an emergency message that Zhou Enlai's right arm had been broken and the three of them should go to Yan'an immediately. Despite the darkness and the slippery roads, they leapt onto horses and rode as fast as they could.

After a period of treatment, Zhou Enlai's arm was getting better. One day, Indian doctors were surprised to see that Zhou Enlai was writing with his left hand. "Why are you doing that?" they asked. Zhou Enlai replied: "I am working." Kotnis was deeply touched.

In the early winter of 1939, Zhu De, Commander-in-Chief of the Eighth Route Army, telegraphed the Indian doctors to invite them to the front. Before they left, Chairman Mao had a long talk with Kotnis, wishing him to work well, study well and have good health. Chairman Mao even treated him to a meal cooked by himself.



The journey to the front was very difficult. On November 23, their overloaded truck broke down. Kotnis joked, "We've offended the truck, so we've got to pay for it!" He started to tow the truck with a rope.

The road became more and more difficult. They had to go on foot now, with a few on horseback. They fought their way through snow and wind and encountered some gunfire as well. Though this was the first time they had experienced battle, they were not afraid.

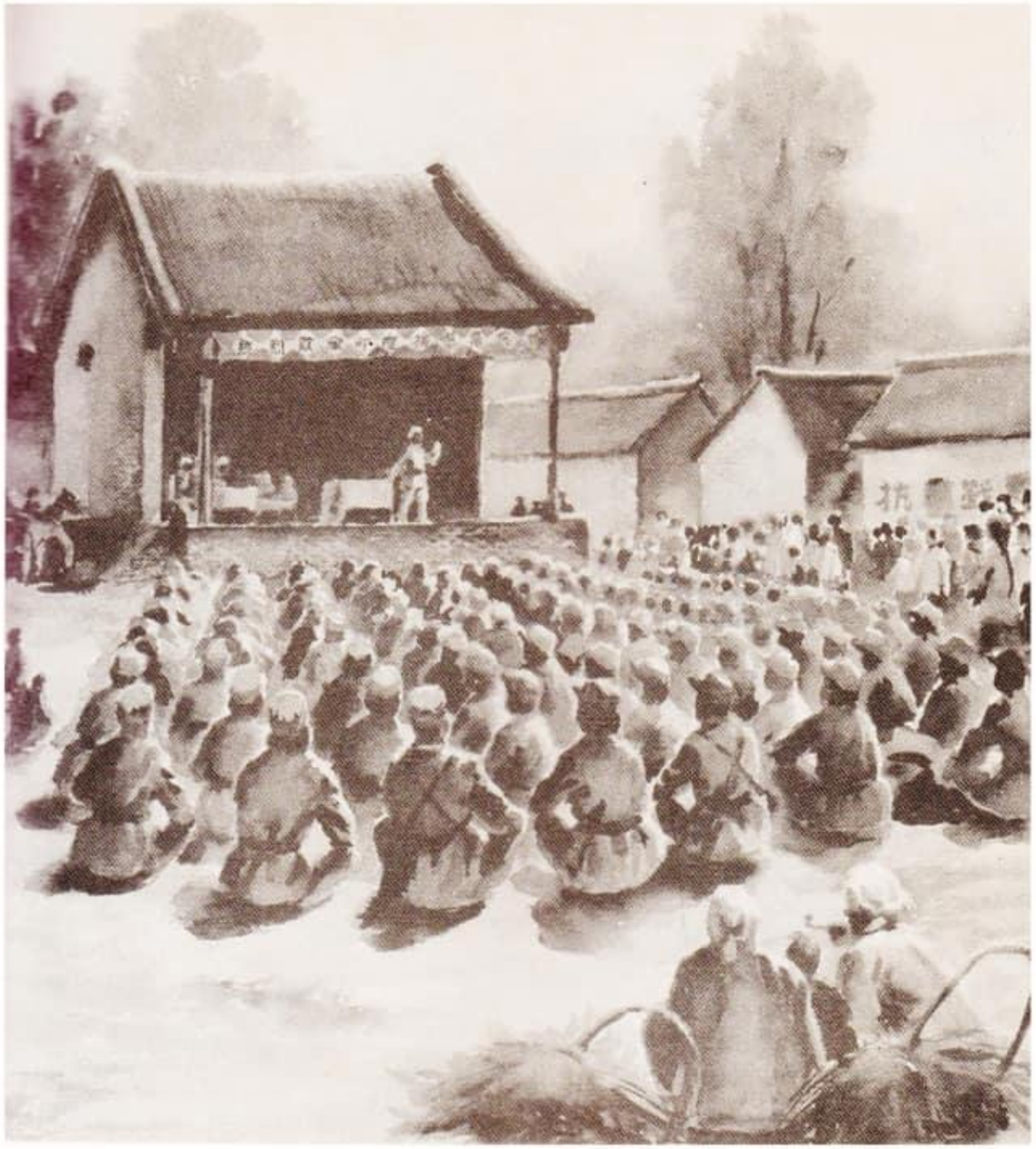
Two months later, after a long and arduous journey, they arrived at their destination. Commander-in-Chief Zhu De received them in the headquarters of the Eighth Route Army. Looking at their weathered faces, Zhu De shook hands with each of them.

On November 12, 1939, Dr. Norman Bethune, leader of the Aid-China Medical Team of the United States and Canada, died of illness at the battlefront. Dr. Kotnis attended the memorial meeting. Standing in front of Dr. Bethune's portrait, Kotnis said, "You've set a good example for me."

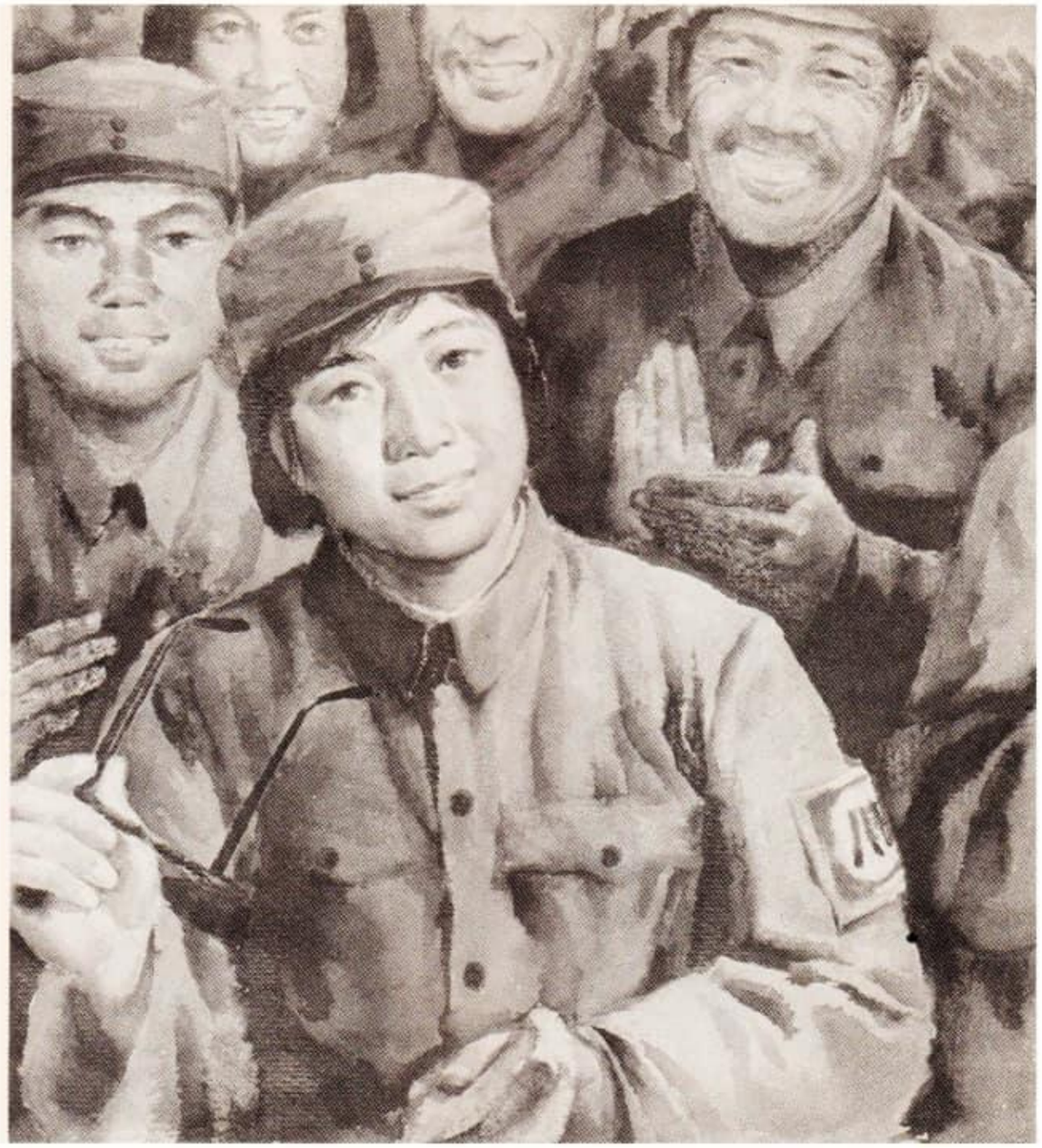
In early 1940, Atal was sick and returned to India. Of the original five members of the Indian Medical Mission, only Dr. Kotnis and Dr. Basu were still in China. They were assigned to the Medical School in the Shanxi-Qahar-Hebei Border Region, where Dr. Norman Bethune once worked.

On the way to the school, they ran into the fierce Zhangdian Battle. A temporary operating room was set up close to the battlefield. They worked for forty-six hours in a hail of bullets, and saved more than a hundred wounded soldiers.

To cut off the enemy's transportation between Shijiazhuang and Dezhou, they helped the local people to destroy the railway tracks at night, using picks or their bare hands.

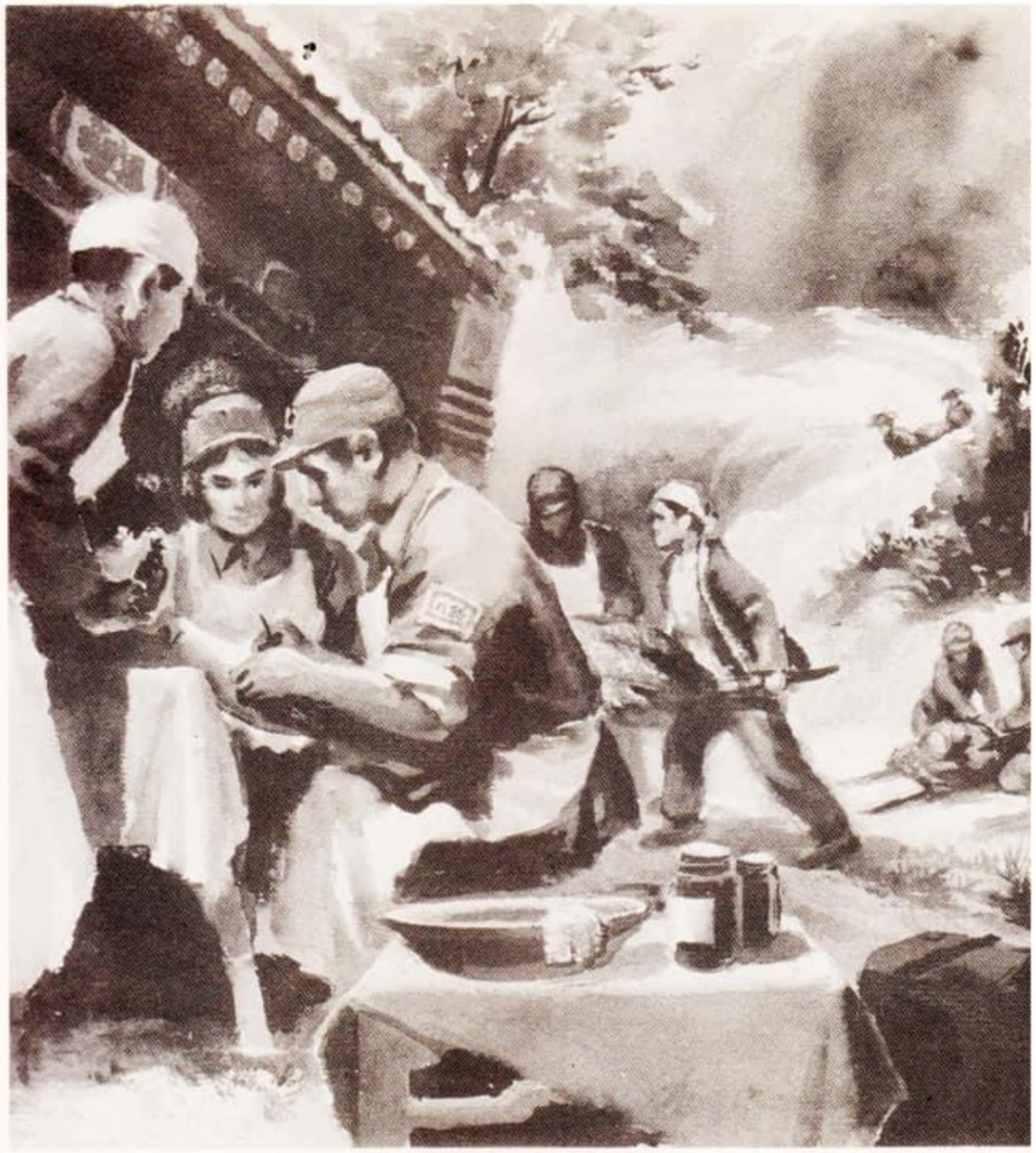


On August 17, Kotnis and Basu arrived at the village where the Bethune Medical School and the Bethune International Peace Hospital were located. At the meeting to welcome them, Kotnis made a speech in Chinese, saying, "I will devote myself to the cause of anti-fascism on behalf of the people in the world, like Dr. Bethune."



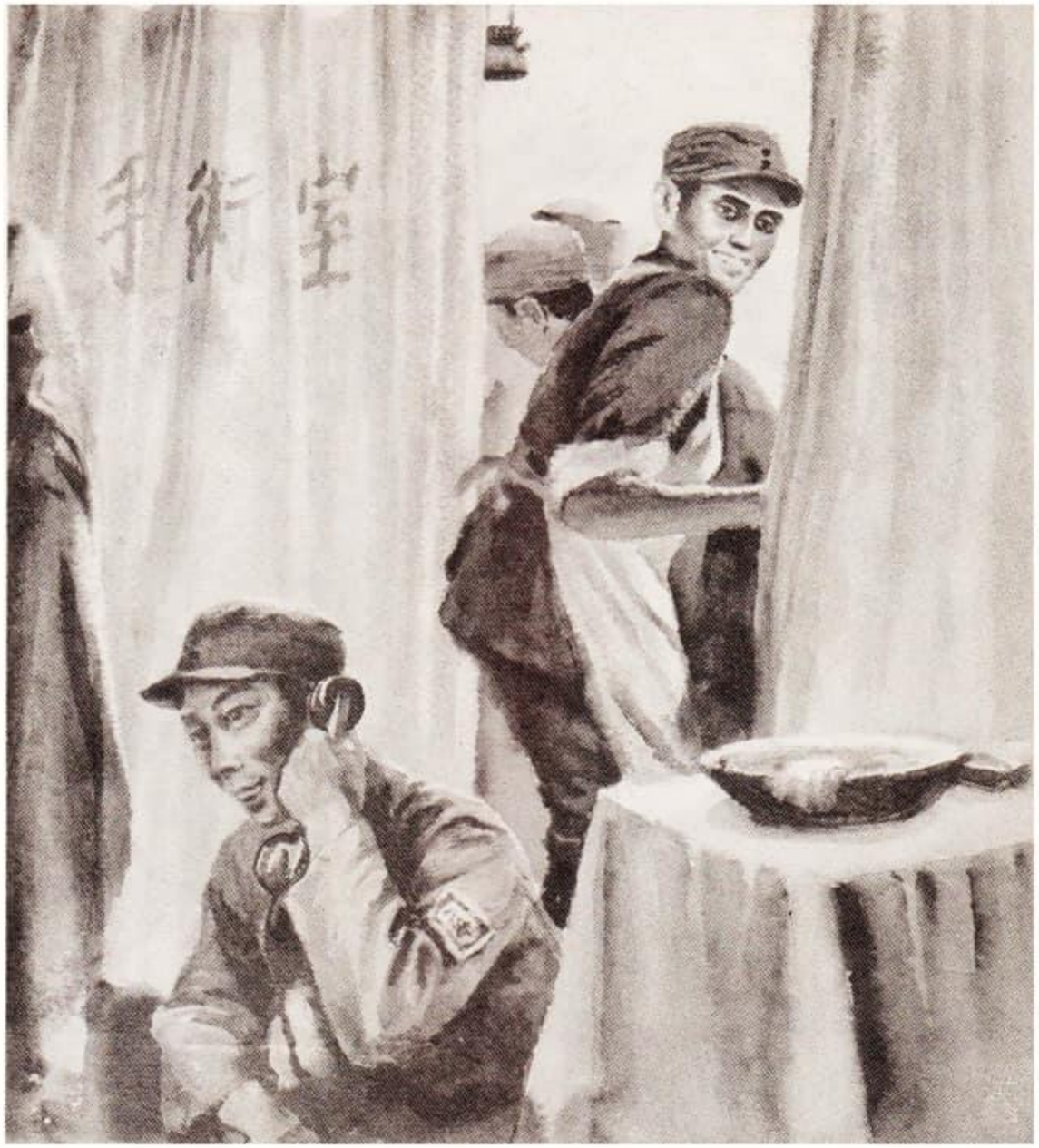
His speech won warm applause from his audience.
A girl named Guo Qinglan was so moved by Kotnis's selflessness and sincerity that she wept.

In September after the "Hundred Regiment Battle" had broken out, Kotnis and Basu each led a medical team and went to different battlefields. Before leaving they wished each other good luck.



Kotnis set up a surgical station just behind the firing line. In the midst of the smoke of gunpowder, he worked for thirteen days in a row and operated on 585 wounded soldiers.

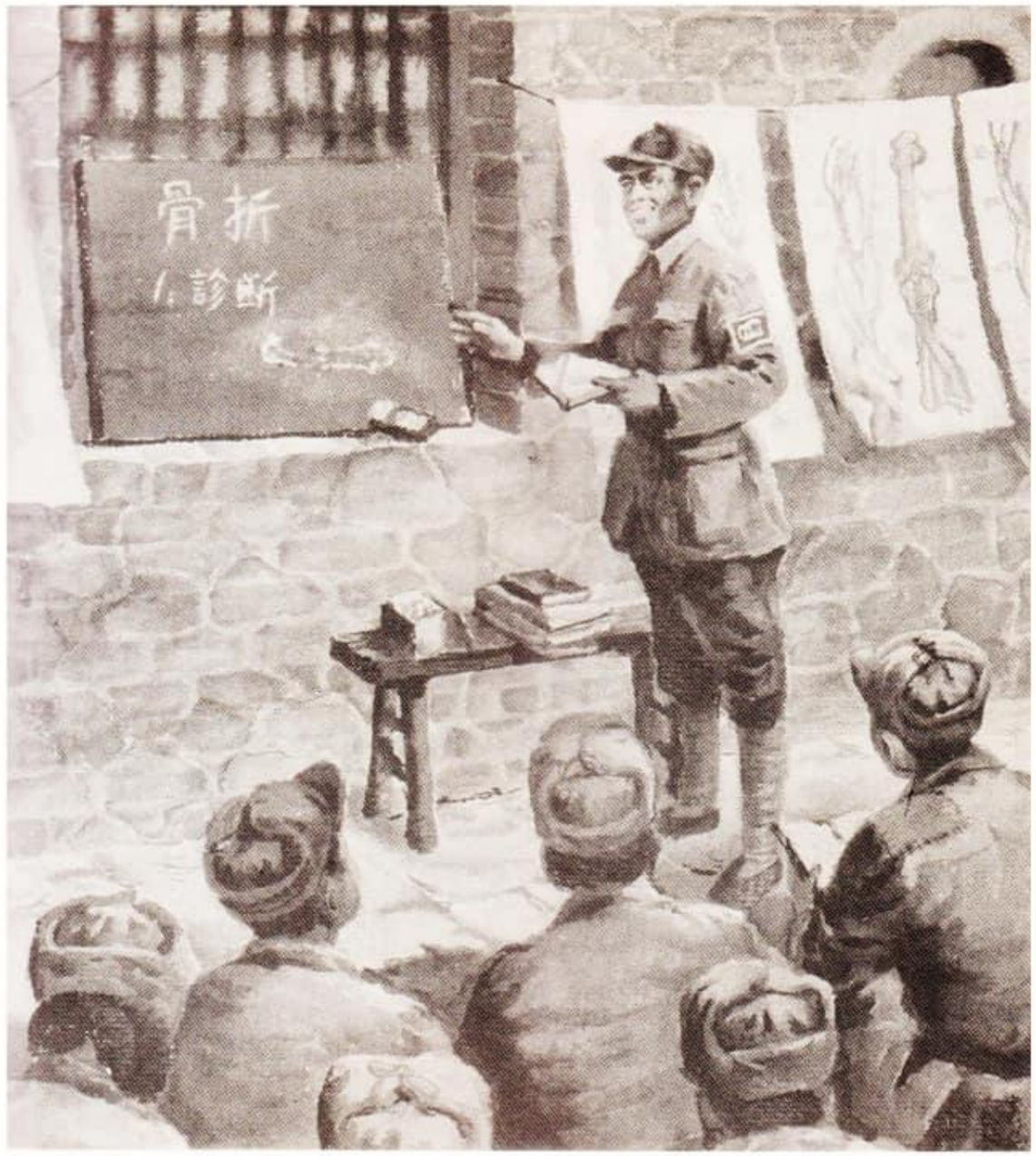
He hadn't slept for three days, so when the last patient was carried away, he fell asleep right on the operation table.



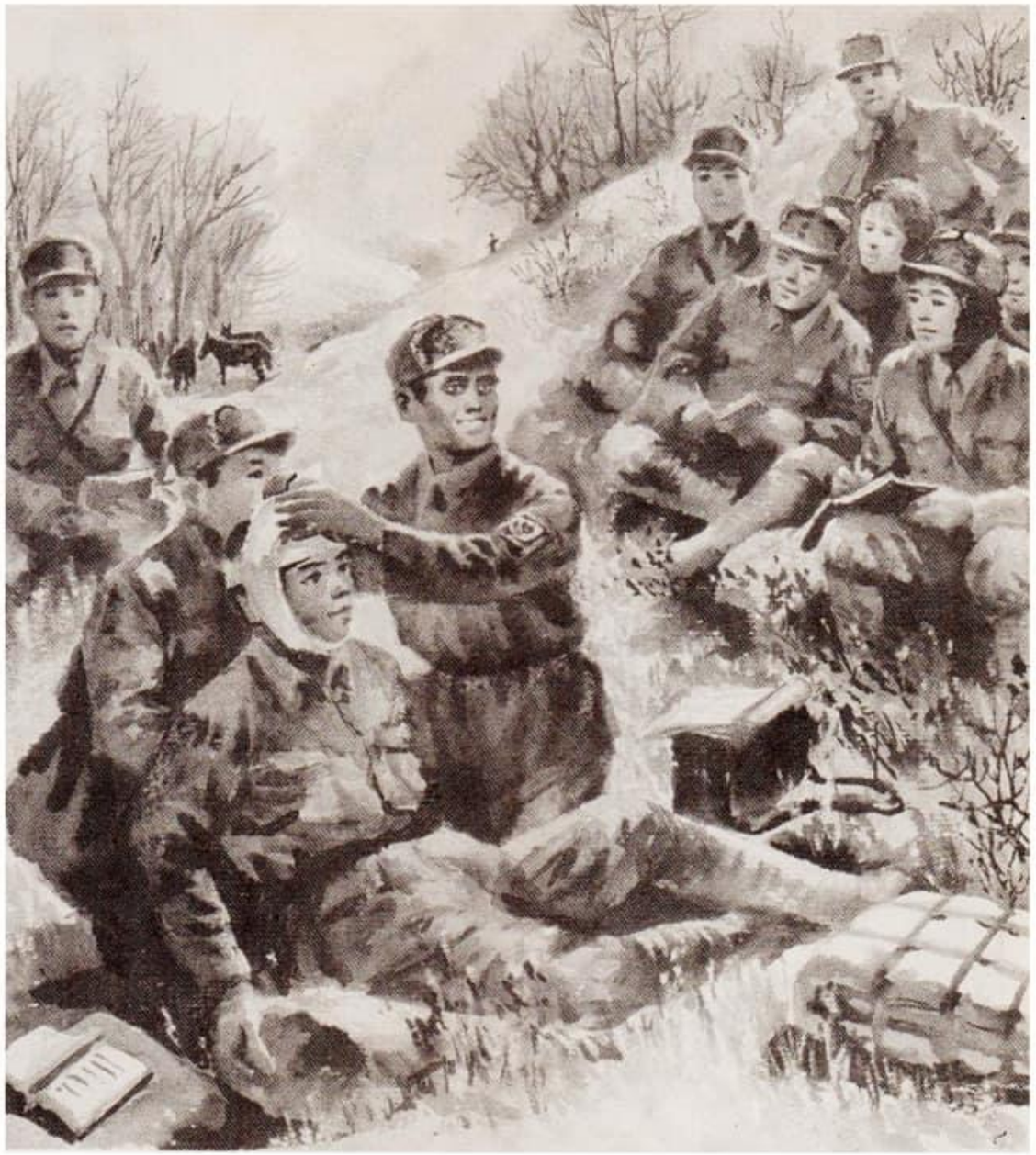
Jiang Yizhen, the President of the Bethune Medical School, admonished him kindly but seriously to pay attention to his own health. Without any explanation Kotnis quietly left the room while Jiang Yizhen was talking on the phone.

A few days after Kotnis and Basu had returned from the battlefield, they received a cable from India, asking them to go back to their homeland at once. Kotnis insisted that he not go back to India because the people of China needed him. Basu himself returned to Yan'an to make a report about Kotnis's decision.

Kotnis was appointed instructor in surgery. Guo Qinglan, who knew English very well, helped him to learn Chinese. Kotnis studied hard and could soon conduct his classes in Chinese. At the same time he fell in love with Guo Qinglan and couldn't bear to be separated from her.

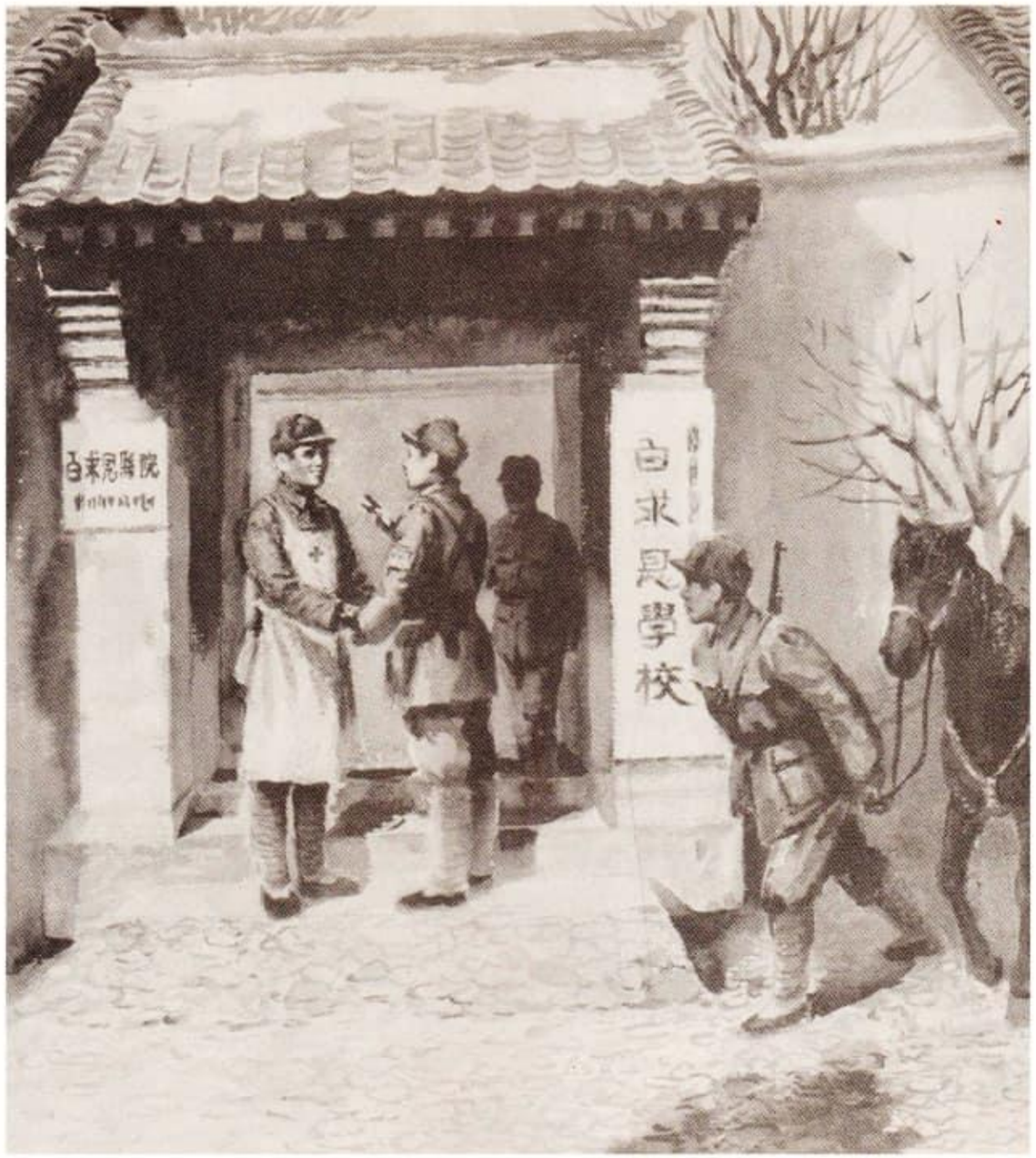


The school was short of teaching facilities. Classes were often held in the courtyard, even during the winter. Though Kotnis was not used to the cold weather, he always offered the lee side to the students.



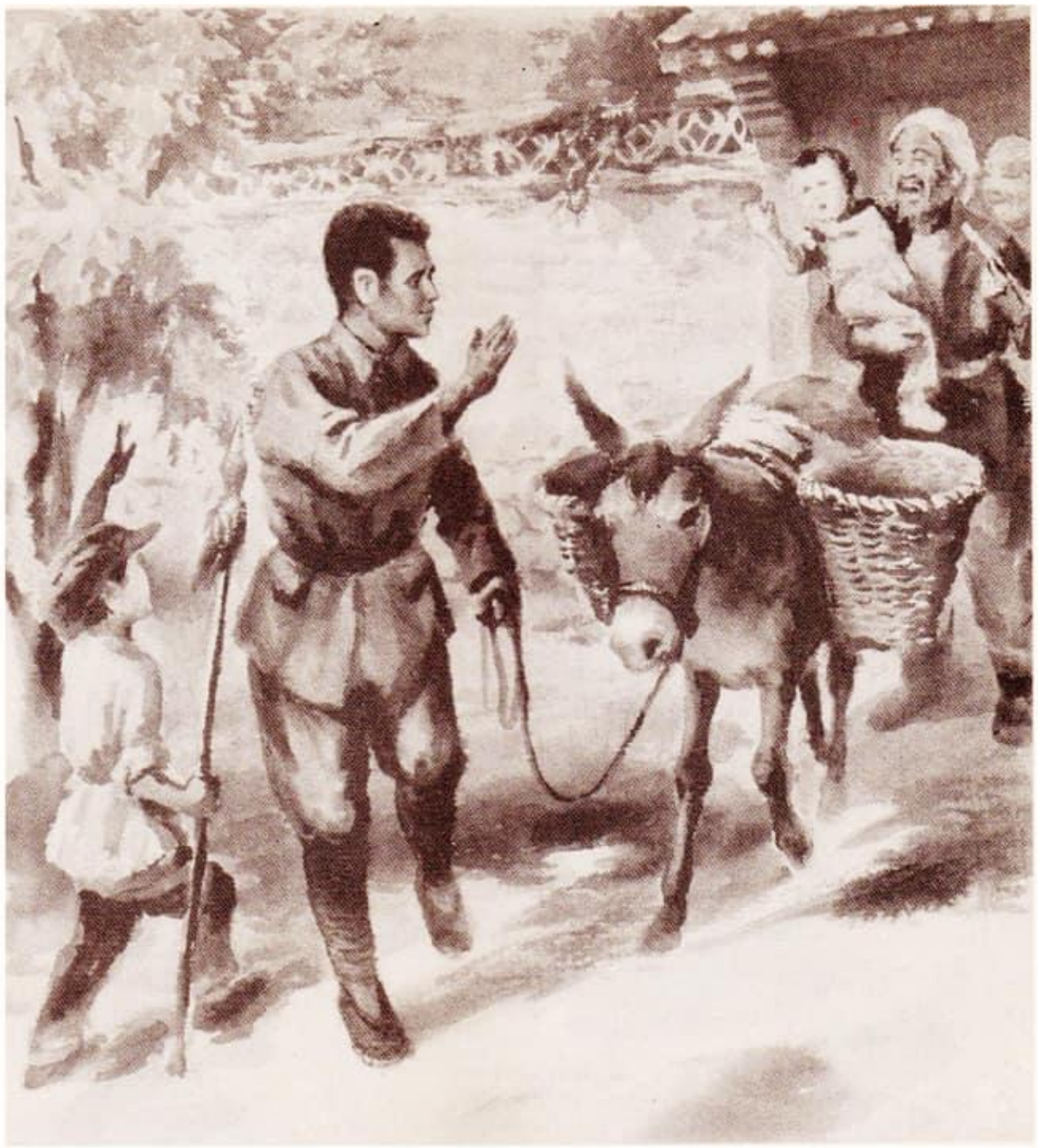
They had classes or conducted animal experiments during the intervals between campaigns. Teachers and students called this kind of teaching "armed instruction". Kotnis did his best to adapt to the circumstances, and he taught conscientiously.

In 1941, a group of graduating students wanted Kotnis's inscription before they left. So he wrote "Anti-Japanese War Must Win" in Chinese and "Studying Hard for the Liberation of All Exploited People in the World" in English.



When the Red Army's "anti-mopping-up" operation ended, Kotnis was appointed the first Director of the Norman Bethune International Peace Hospital by Nie Rongzhen, Commander of the Shanxi-Qahai-Hebei Military Region. That was beyond his expectation. He worried that he was not qualified for the job. But Jiang Yizhen said earnestly: "Commander Nie has asked me to convey to you his hope that you will become a second Bethune."

Kotnis knew that that was the hope of the commander and the soldiers, but it was also his objective. To be a good director, he listened to all sorts of opinions from his colleagues and patients.



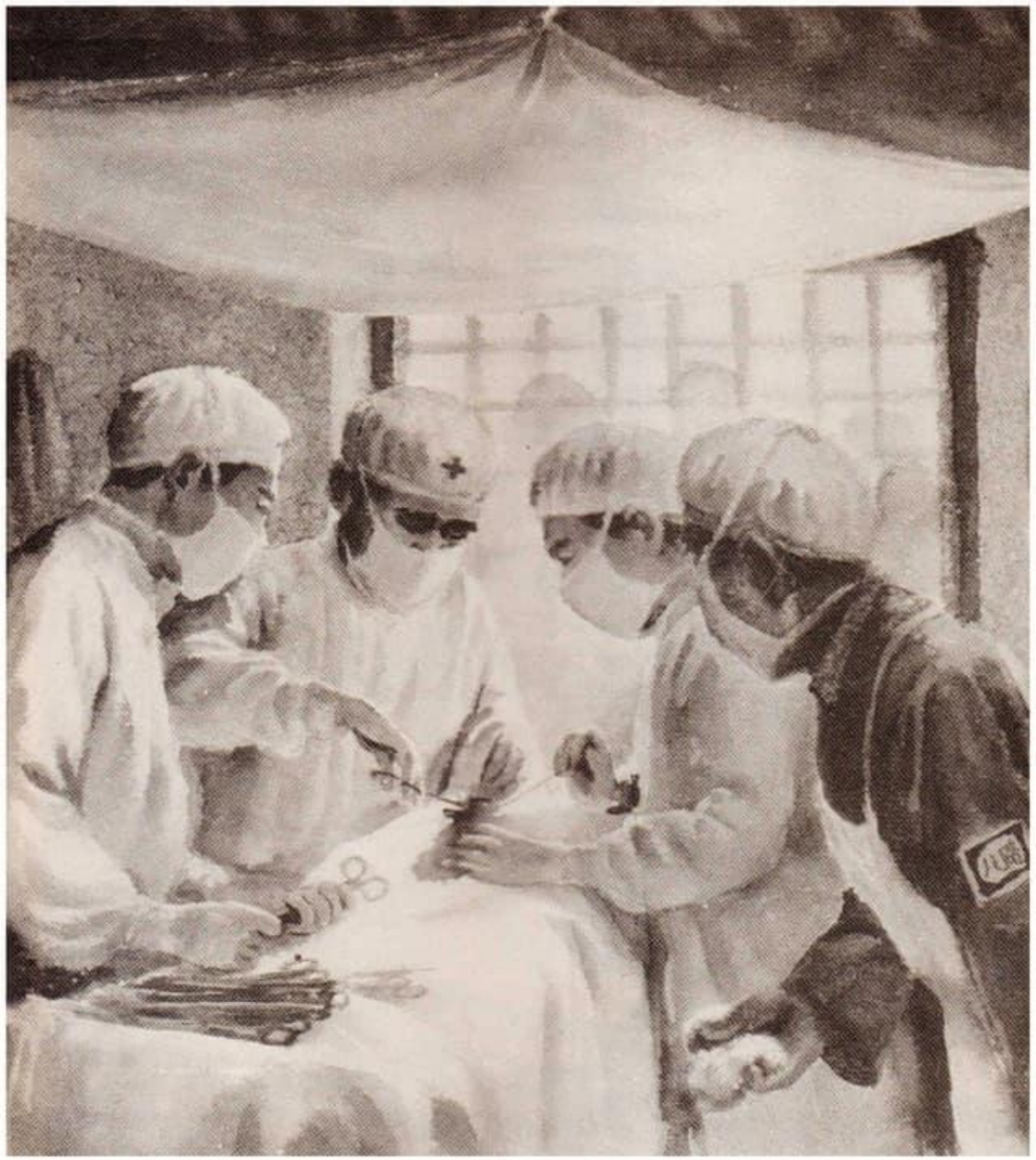
He mobilized local people to carry stretchers, transport rations and forage and do other jobs around the hospital. When the people saw Kotnis work wholeheartedly for the cause of the Anti-Japanese War, they were always happy to do what they were asked.

Owing to the help of the local people and the experience gained from practice, Kotnis made great improvement in medical treatment. Lots of wounded soldiers were cured. Before they left for the front, Kotnis always said, "Good luck to you!"

On Nurses' Day, Kotnis published an article in the newspaper, entitled "Model Nurse — Nightingale." In the article, he wrote that the nurses and medical workers of the Eighth Route Army should learn from the example of Florence Nightingale. He himself certainly did.

One day, a seriously wounded soldier who needed major abdominal surgery was sent to the hospital. The doctors and nurses at the hospital were very worried, because they lacked necessary equipment or experience for such a complicated operation.

Kotnis was also deeply concerned. He asked for advice from veteran doctors, made plan for the operation and designed some simple equipment for it that very night. H didn't know that it was daybreak until his bodyguard brought in his breakfast.

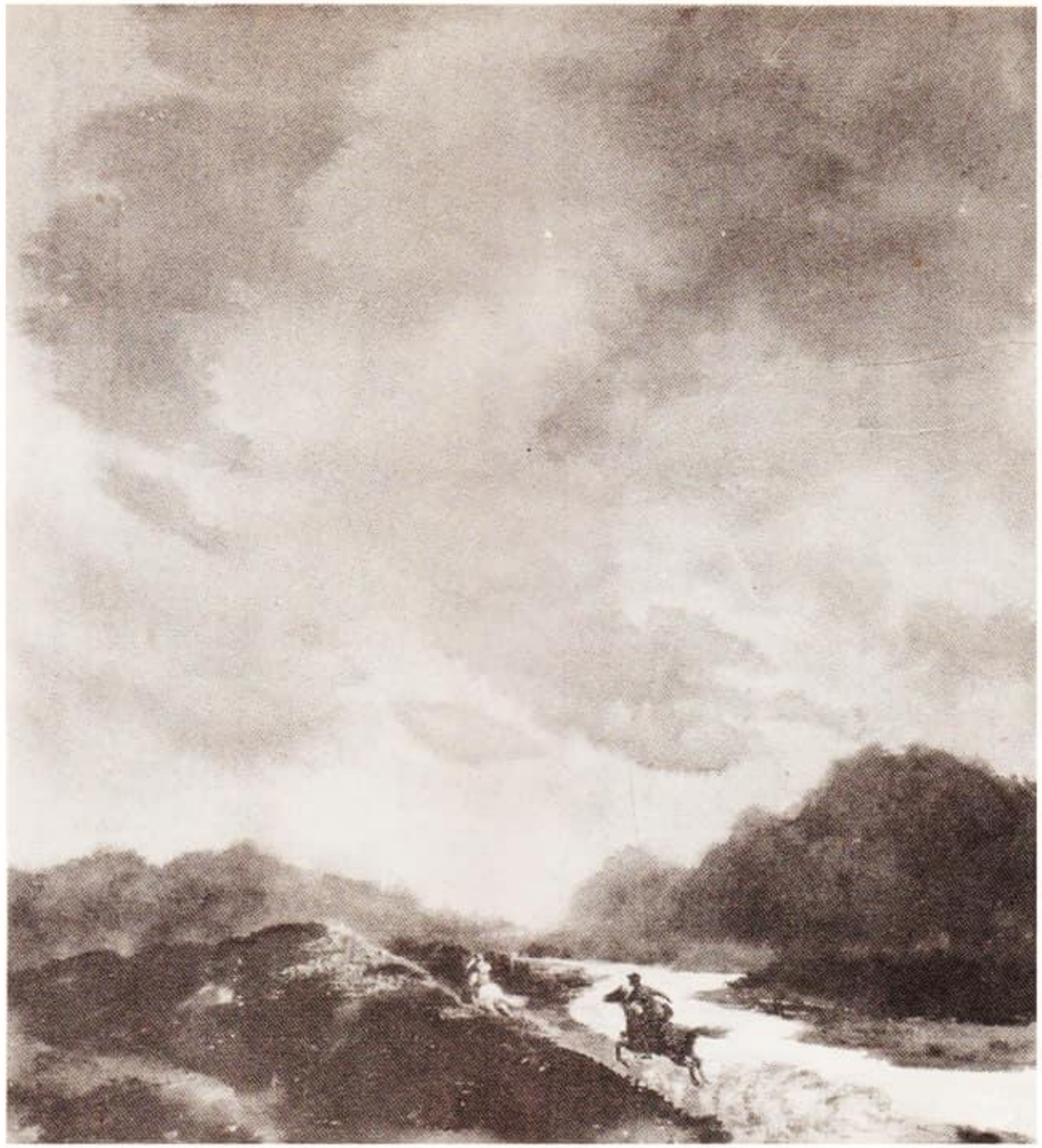


The operation began, with Kotnis as chief surgeon. People inside and outside the operating room waited nervously for the results, but Kotnis's hands were calm and sure.

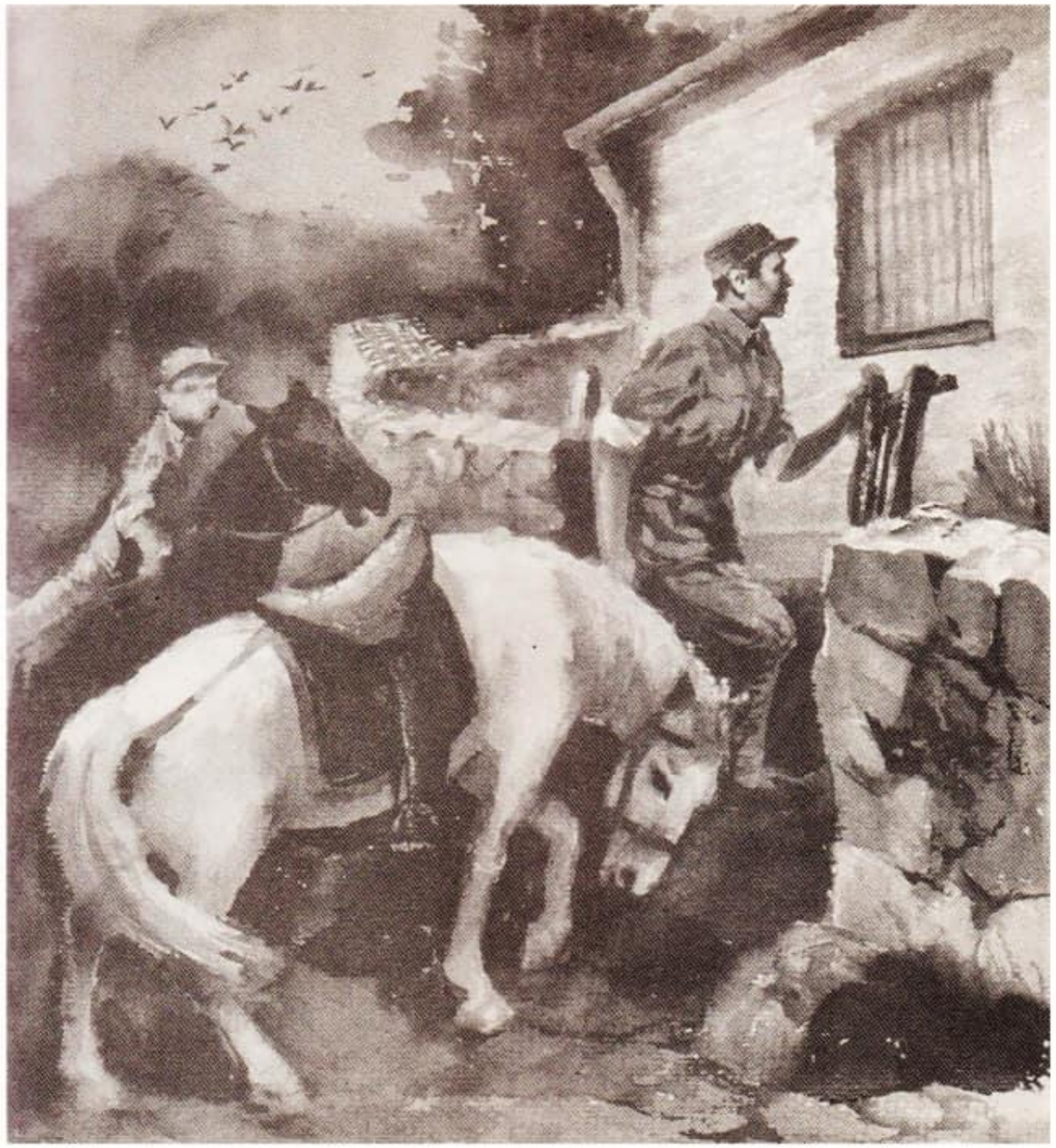
The operation was a success. Later on, he performed many complicated operations. Commander-in-Chief Nie Rongzhen praised him highly.

When the harvest season drew near, the love between Kotnis and Guo Qinglan was ripening. One cold day in late autumn, when Kotnis was making a fire Guo came into his house with a woollen vest in her hand. She put the vest on his bed and said, "I knitted this vest for you."

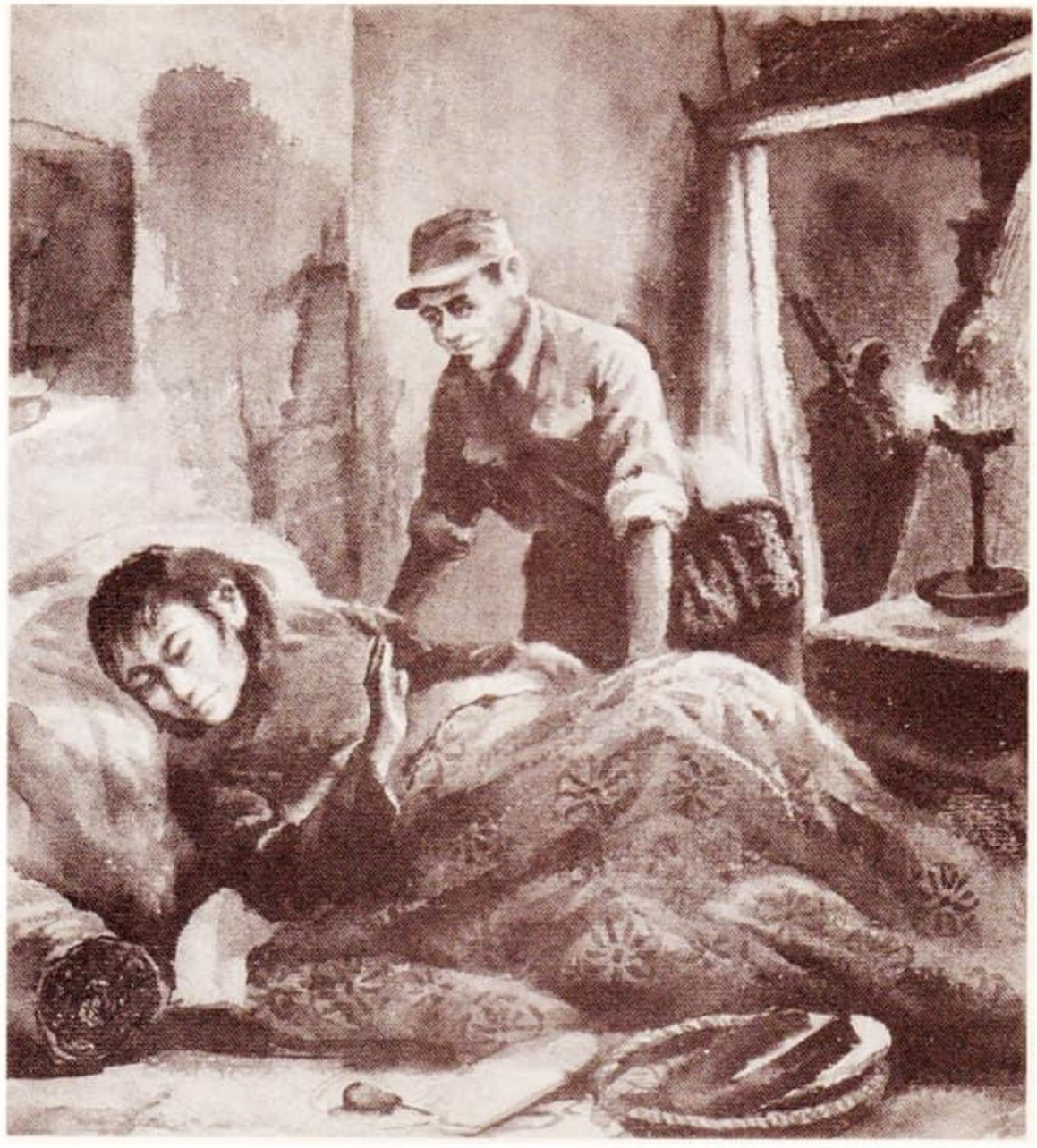
Guo left the room before Kotnis could say "Thank you." Kotnis rushed out the door and gazed at her receding figure. The flame of love was burning in his heart.



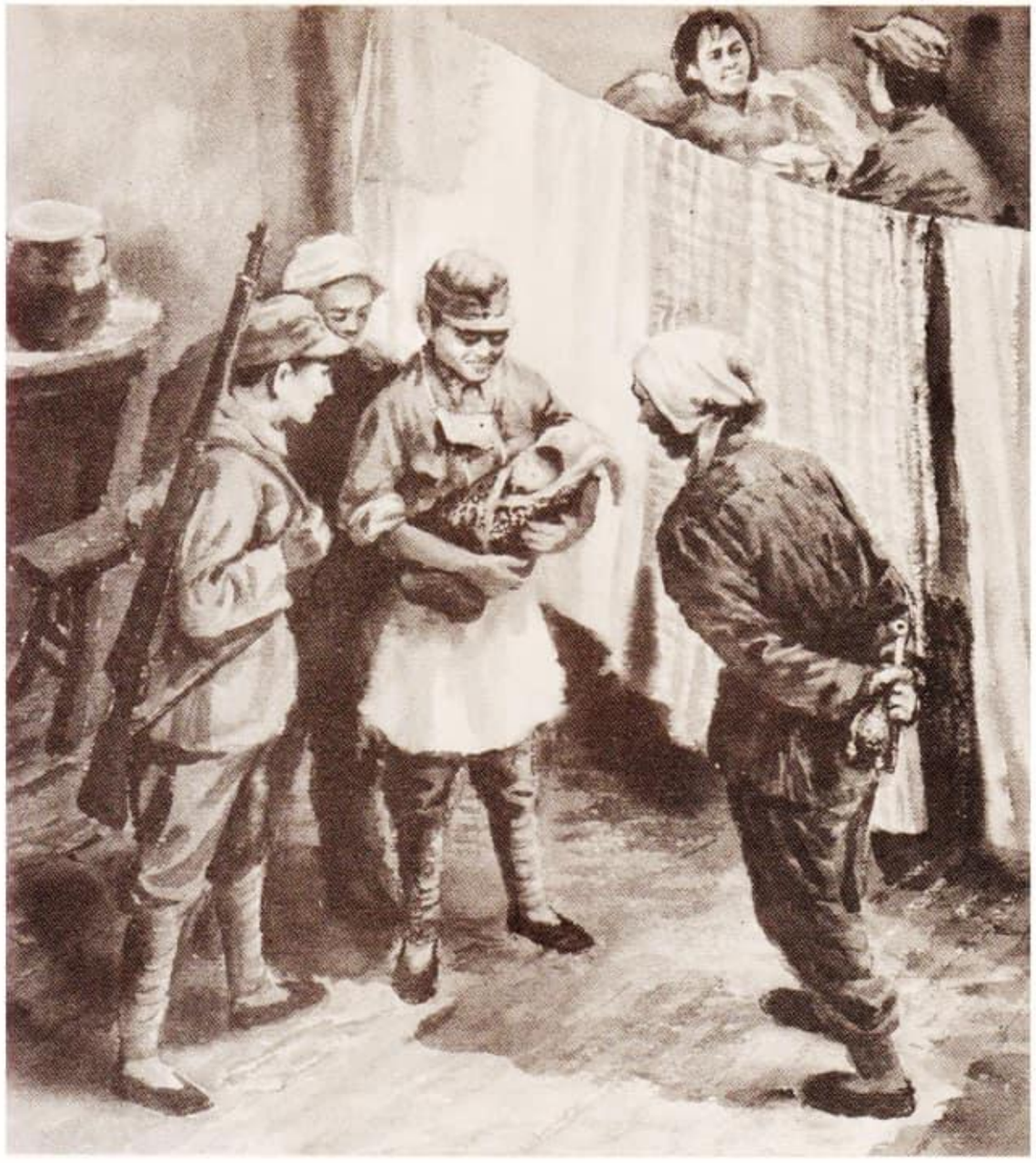
Shots of the Japanese aggressors broke the stillness of dawn, and the enemy's mopping-up operation began. Kotnis, who was at a meeting in the military region then, galloped back to the hospital right away and organized the evacuation of the patients and local people.



En route, Kotnis heard moans nearby. Who could it be? He turned his horse off the road and followed the sound of the moans.



It turned out to be a woman who was about to have a baby. Kotnis told his bodyguard to put her on a stretcher, but the woman waved her hand to stop them and asked them to leave her there. Otherwise, the enemy would surround them. Kotnis said: "We are doctors of the Eighth Route Army, and we cannot leave you here alone!"



She was carried to a safe place and gave birth to a beautiful girl. She cast a glance of thanks to Kotnis, while the people around her smiled and called the little girl a flower of friendship between China and India.

The battle went on, and Kotnis led his people to a remote mountain area. In the autumn rain Kotnis gave his straw hat to a wounded soldier and he himself got wet all over.

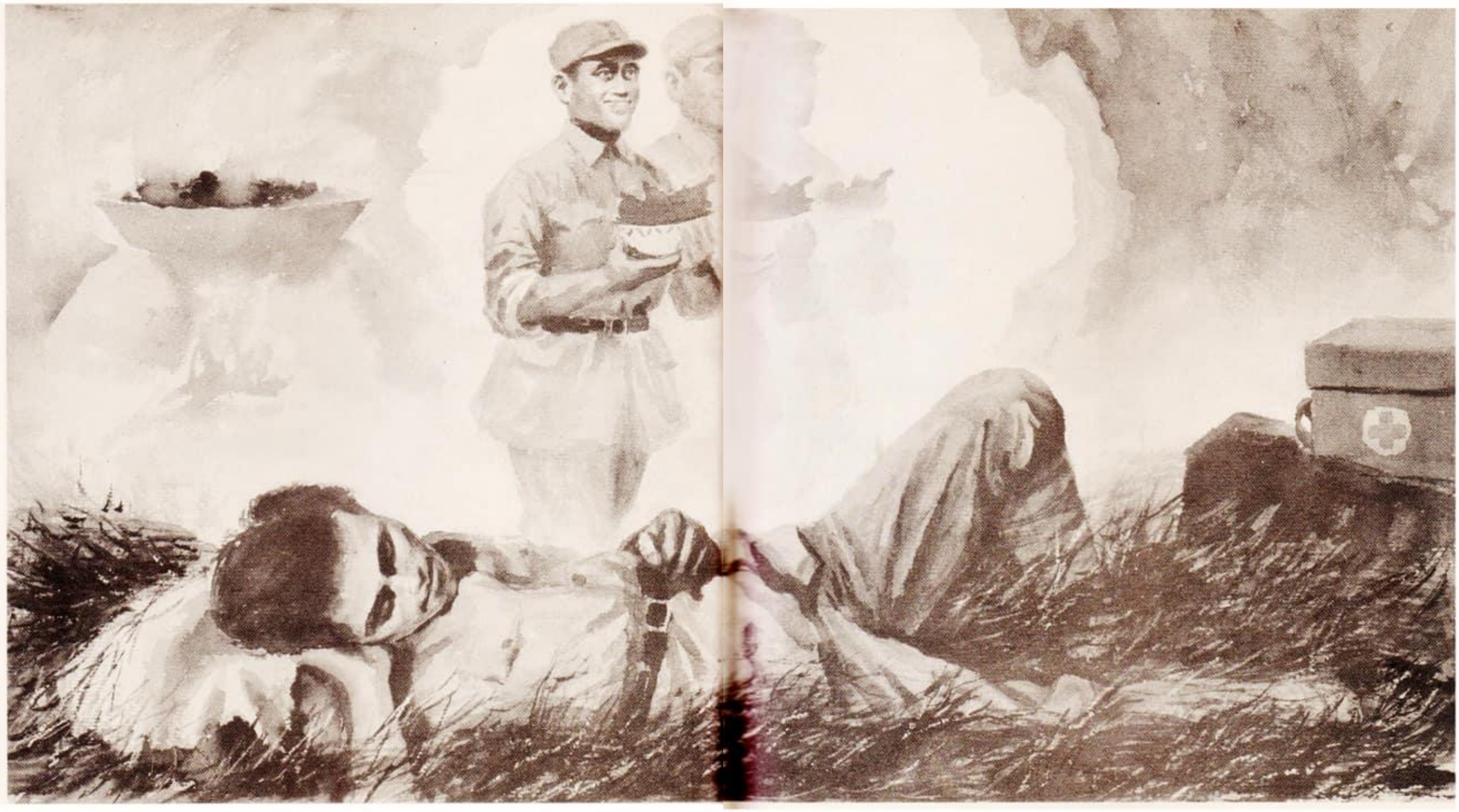
But the enemy spotted them and bombed their camp. Some were wounded and some died. Kotnis and the other survivors buried the dead and then went firmly on their way.

A rider brought Kotnis a message from Commander-in-Chief Nie Rongzhen. It said that the vice secretary-general was wounded badly and asked for help.

Kotnis went to the site of the accident at once with an intern and several nurses. They gave the injured man emergency treatment and then carried him away along a path overgrown with brambles.

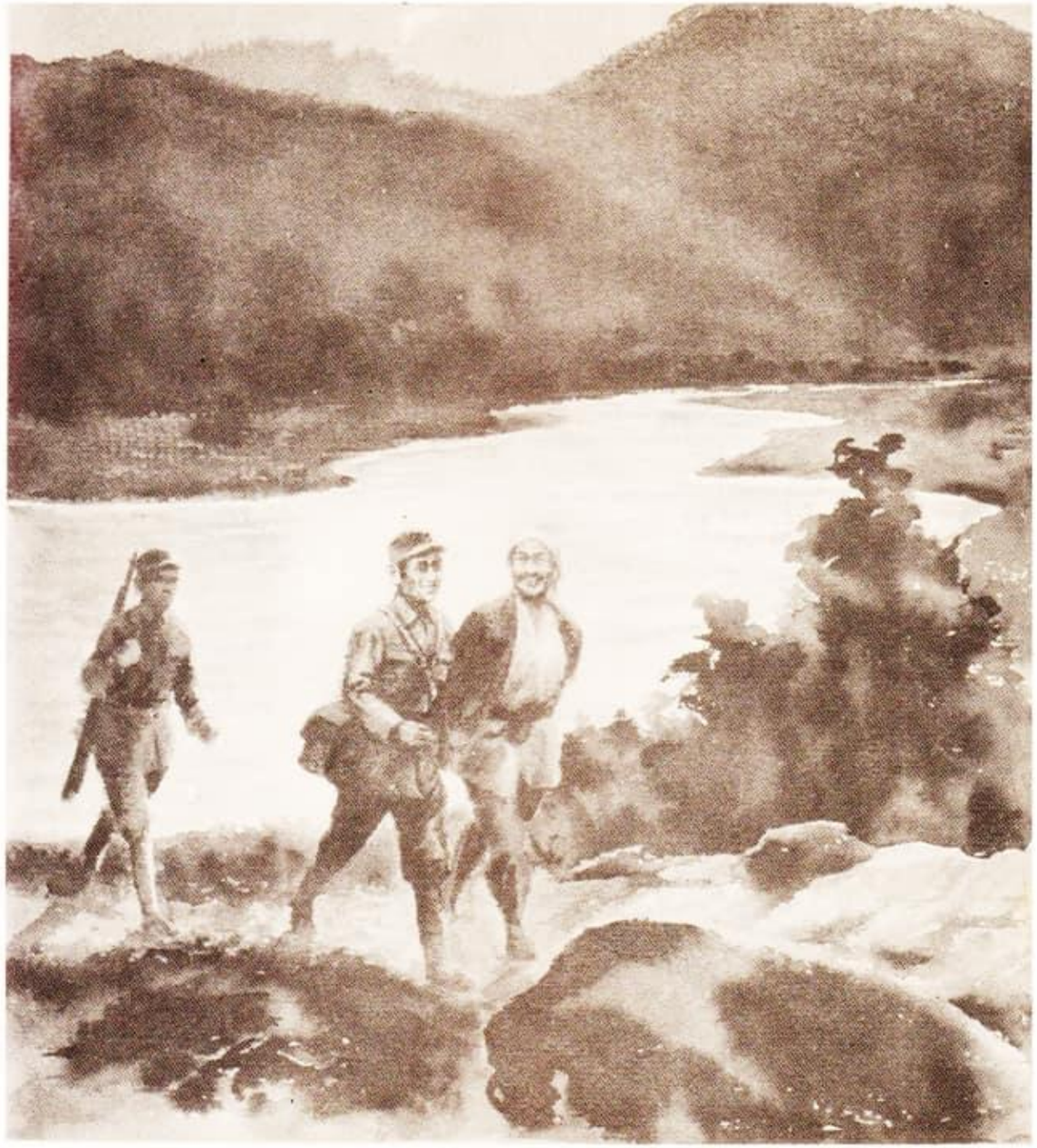
The route grew more difficult, and they were all in a state of exhaustion. Kotnis was no exception, and he felt dizzy.

They couldn't relax for a moment; if they stopped walking, they would go to sleep. Kotnis began to sing the Internationale: "Arise! All you who don't want to be slaves. . . ." One voice followed and then another. The song gave them confidence and the strength to continue their march.



At last they found shelter in a cave. Kotnis checked the wounded man first, and the: fell asleep on the dry grass. He had a dream: There was a pot of stewed mutton in front of him, and he took a bowl of mutton to his patient first ....

Suddenly he was awakened by footsteps. An honest-looking peasant was standing in front of him with a bowl of snow-white salt, and many peasants followed him carrying pumpkins. Kotnis was moved to tears and said in his heart: "These people, what a people!"

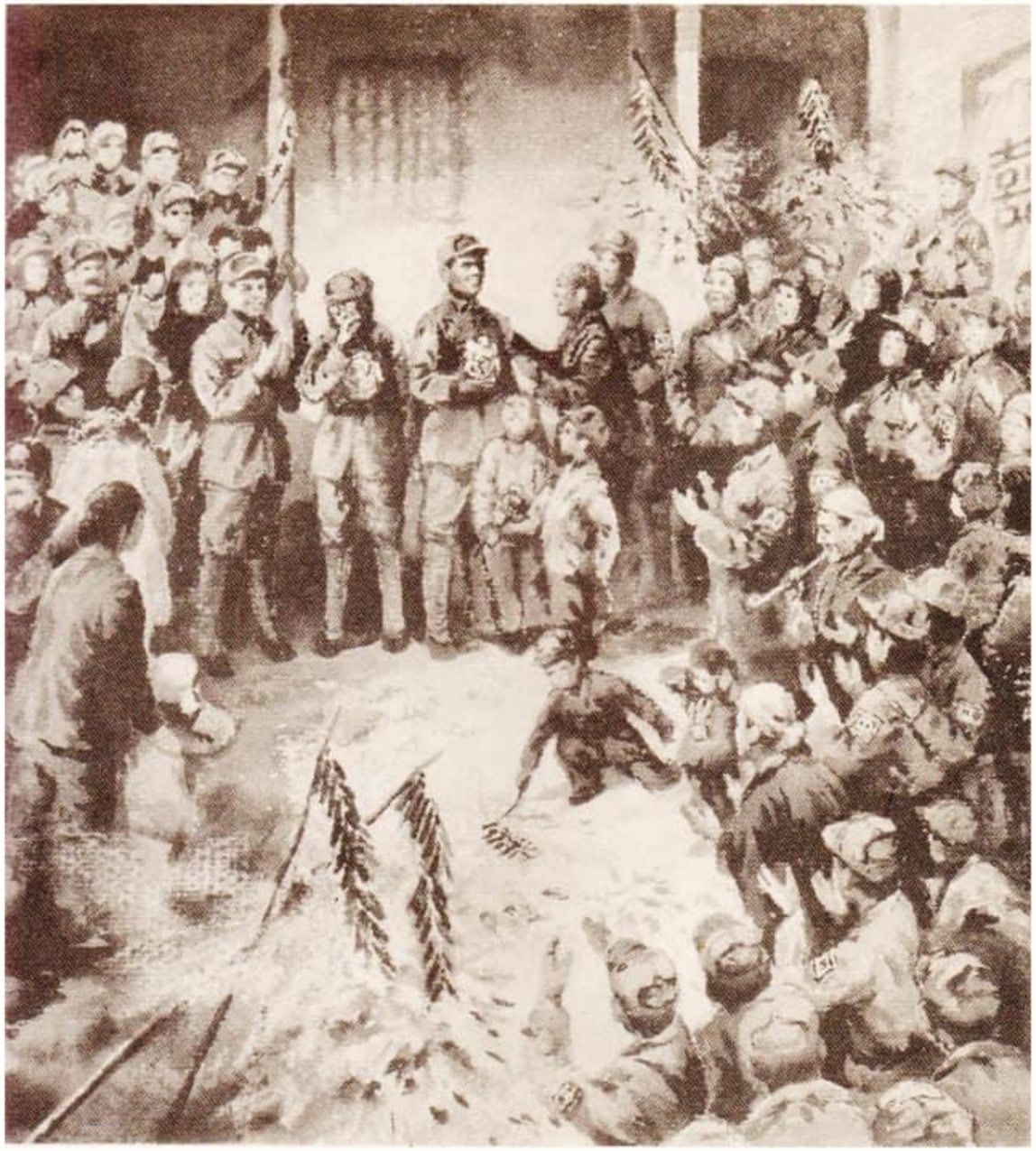


The vice secretary-general was getting better day by day. Kotnis now had time to go to the surrounding villages to repay the people's kindness by tending to the sick. One day he was asked to see a patient in a village ten kilometres away from the cave.

Kotnis spent a whole night there. In the early morning, when he returned to the cave, he collapsed. The intern rushed to him and saw that Kotnis's mouth was tightly closed, his arms and legs twitched, and his pupils were dilated.

Epilepsy! The intern diagnosed the illness right away. He remembered that Kotnis had once shown a tapeworm specimen to his students. They knew that he suffered from tapeworm, but they did not know that he also had epilepsy. "Why didn't he tell us this before?" the intern said to himself.

When the vice secretary-general heard it, he told Kotnis he ought to eat the special food prepared for the patients. But Kotnis would not listen, replying, "Since you are here as a patient, I outrank you. So you have to listen to me."



When the army had finished its "anti-mopping-up" operations, Kotnis and Guo Qinglan got married. The room was decorated according to Chinese tradition with "happiness" papercuts pasted on the window; peanuts and dates were placed on their bed, in the hope that they would have a baby soon. The old people laughed, and referred to Kotnis China's son-in-law.

When the people who had come to congratulate them left, Kotnis seemed lost in thought. He took out the silver tumbler his mother had given him with the words "Never forget your mother" on it, and he looked at pictures of his family taken before he left for China. He said to his wife, "Someday we must go back to India for a home visit."

The year 1942 was the most difficult time for Shanxi-Qahar-Hebei border area. In order to realize their ambition of occupying all of Asia, the Japanese intensified their raids in North China. The Eighth Route Army was so short of food because of the frequent fighting that they had to allay their hunger with bark and tree leaves.

Kotnis ate the same food, millet and black beans, as his Chinese colleagues. One day, one of his colleagues brought a lunchbox of rice especially for him; but Kotnis, usually so even-tempered, got angry. He said: "I don't want to be treated as a guest!"

But, being a foreigner, he was still given a portion of rice and flour. He accepted the food, but gave it to his landlord's sick child. He often bought nourishing food for his seriously wounded patients with his own allowance.

They seldom ate meat in those trying times. Once, when meat was served, Kotnis gave his portion to some nurses who had malaria. The nurses didn't want to deprive him of his meat, but he insisted that they eat it all to the last bite.

To break the blockade, young people from the school and hospital were organized to carry grain from areas occupied by the enemies. Kotnis was about to join them when Jiang Yizhen saw him in the line.

Though he was optimistic, Kotnis's illness was getting worse. The Commander-in-Chief, Nie Rongzhen, urged him to go elsewhere for treatment. Kotnis refused to go anywhere else and said significantly, "If I die here, the people of India and my relatives will be proud of me.

Soon after he handed in his application to join the Communist Party, he was accepted as a Party member. Holding the hand of Jiang Yizhen, who had recommended him for Party membership, Kotnis said excitedly, "I will fight together with the Chinese people for the birth of an equal, free, and happy China."

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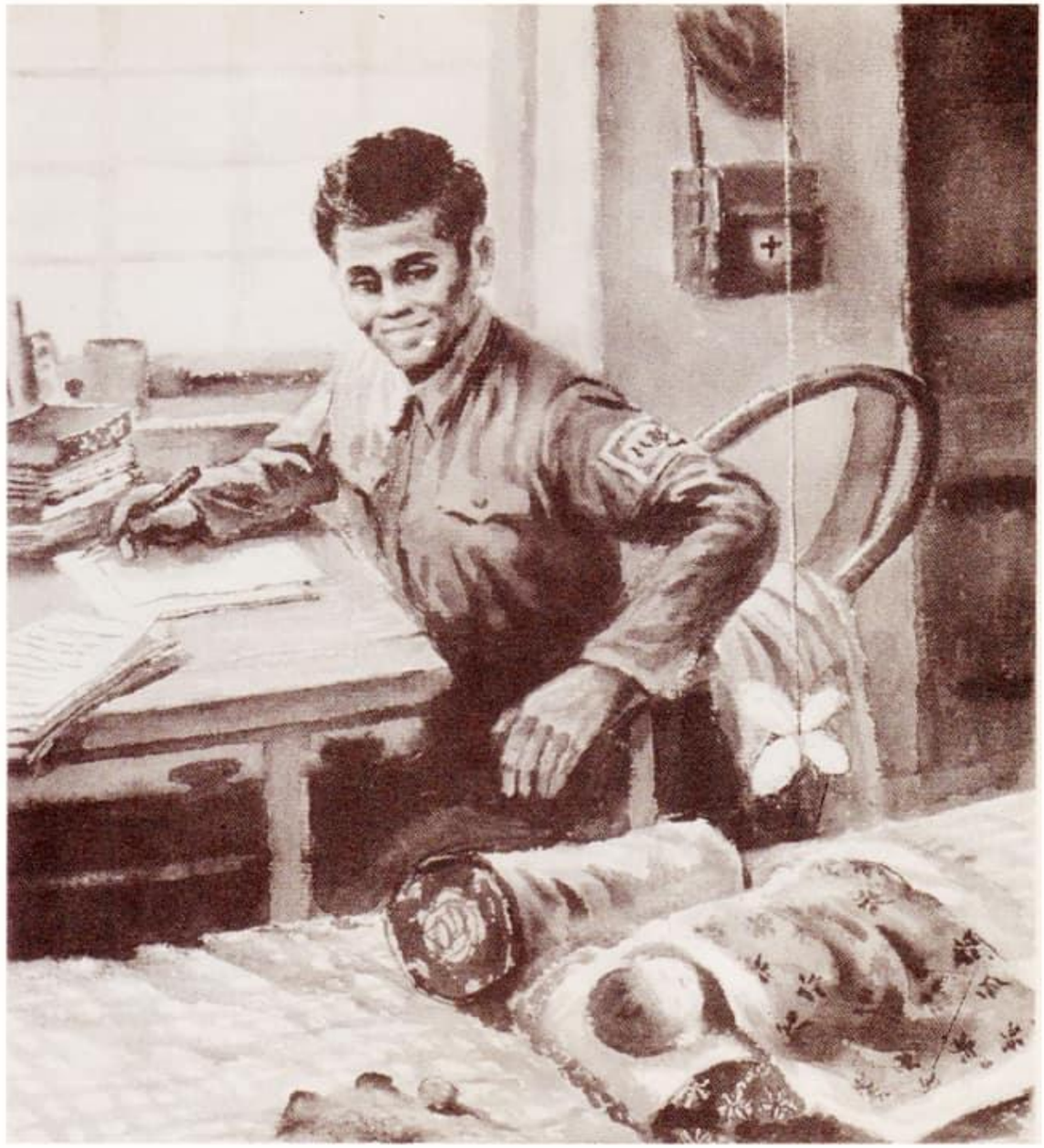
Now Kotnis worked even harder. In the summer of 1942, he started to compile a book entitled General Introduction to Surgery. The weather was damp and humid. To keep the mosquitoes away, he wore a veil of gauze over his head.

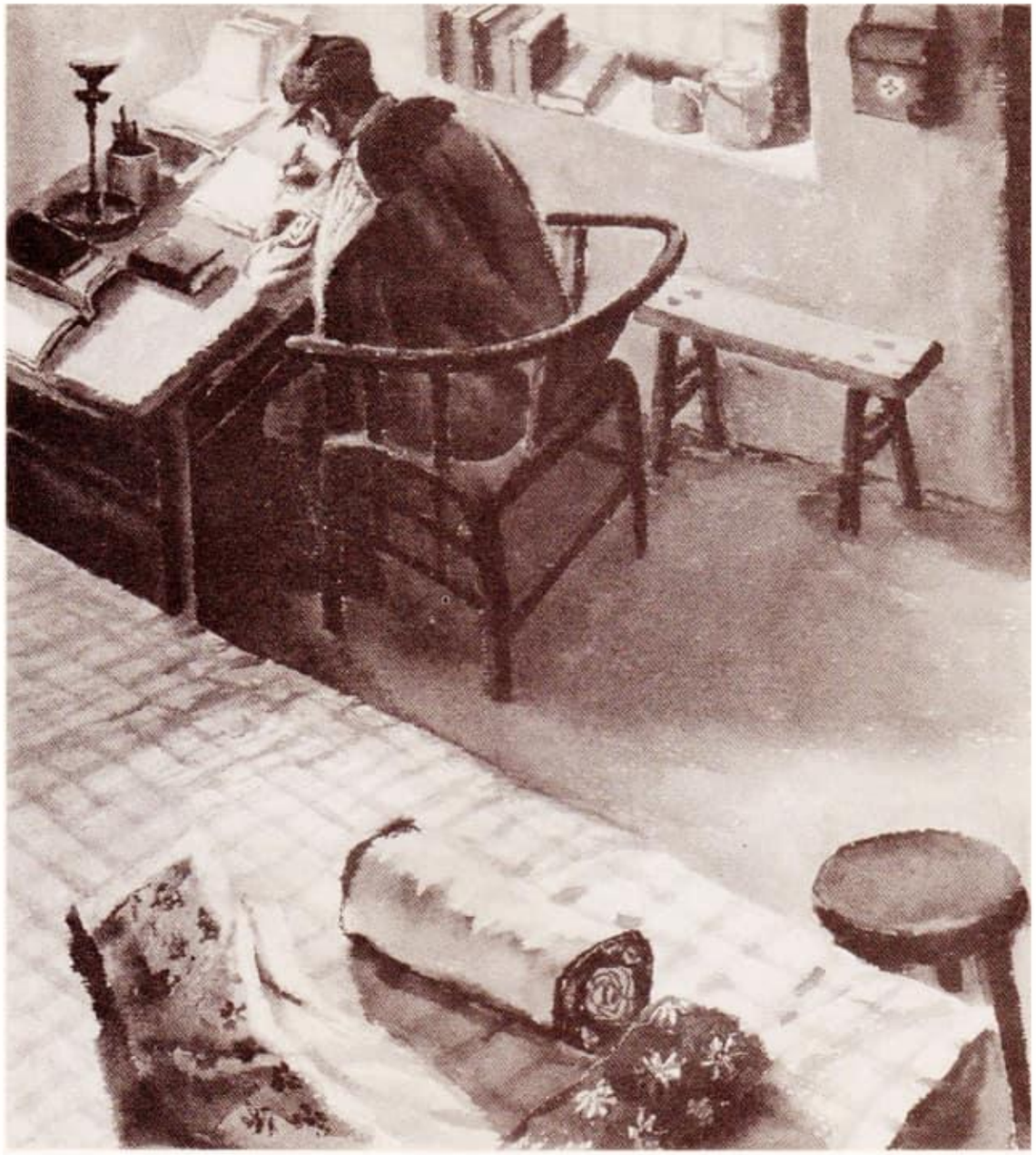
In August, Guo Qinglan gave birth to a boy who looked very much like his father, with his dark face and deep-set eyes. Kotnis said again and again to his infant son: "Grow up, grow up quickly, and go to India to see your grandmother."



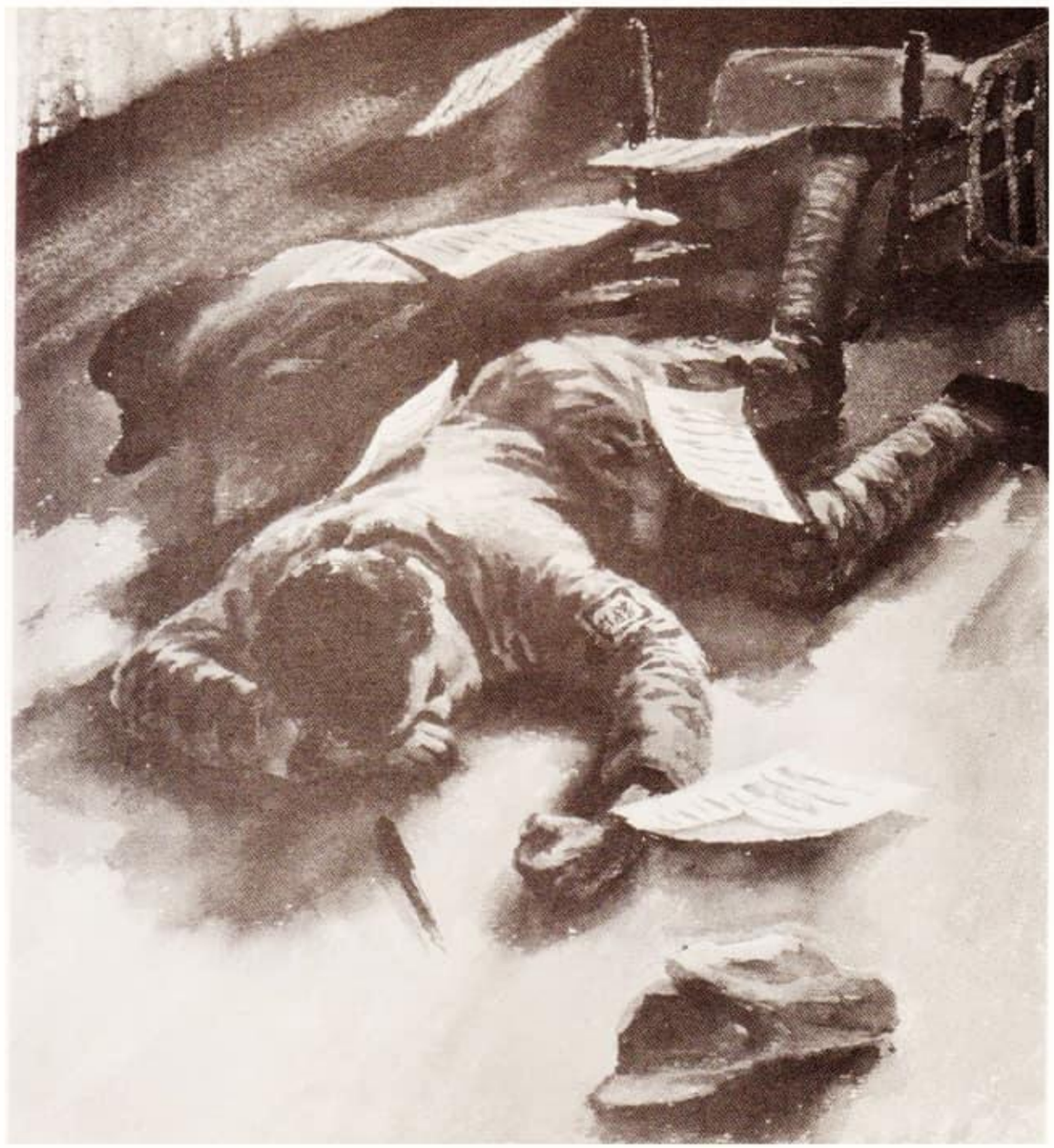
He finished General Introduction to Surgery in autumn and then began to work on Surgery in Detail. He loved his little son. But after kissing the baby on the forehead, he would go right back to work. He wanted to celebrate the birth by publishing his new book.

On December 8, 1942, in a raging snowstorm, Kotnis went to a nearby village with his assistant to operate on a villager.

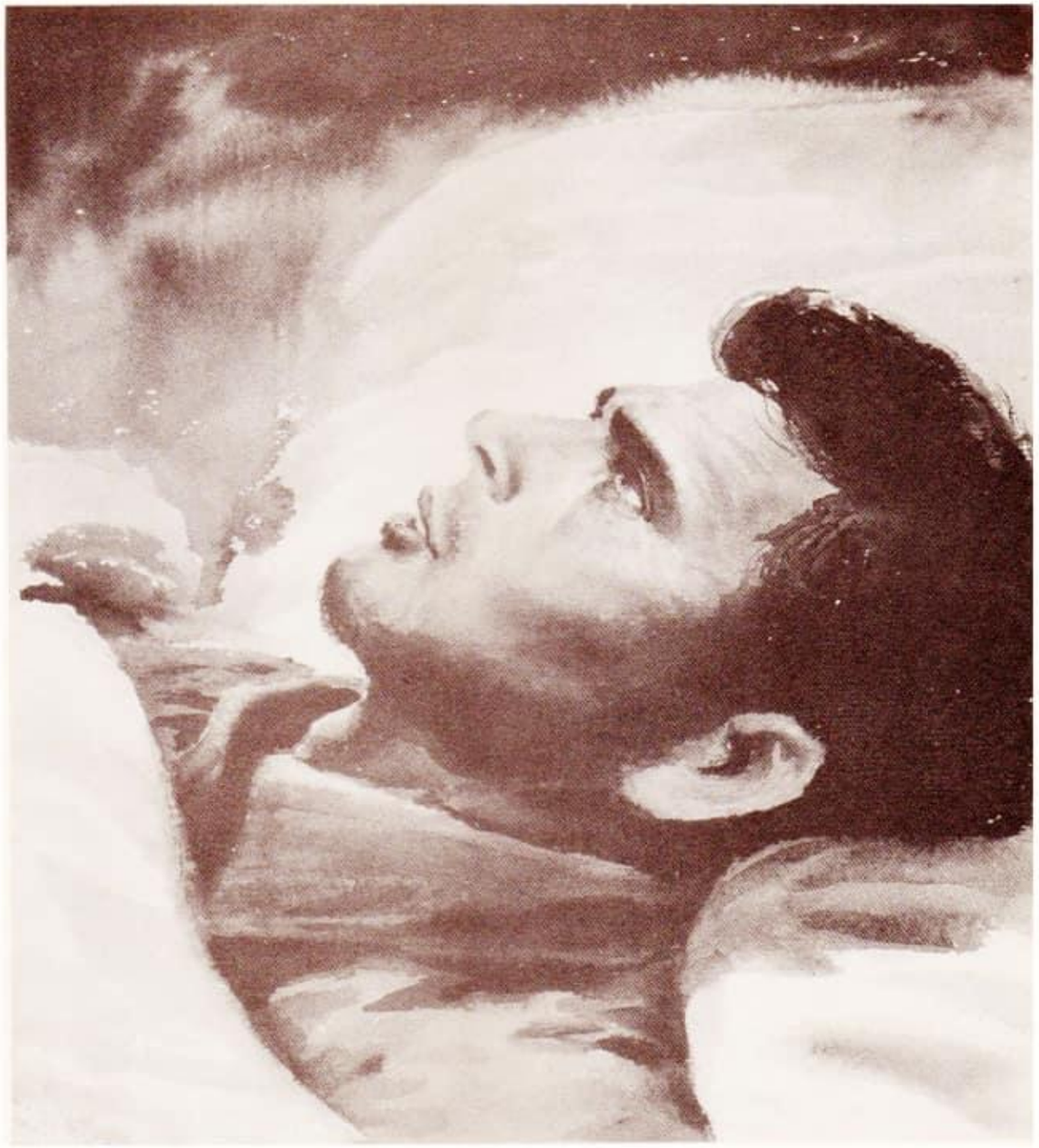
He was there the whole morning and came back at noon. As soon as he lay down to rest, he was asked to see another patient. He set out in the snow again, still buttoning his coat.



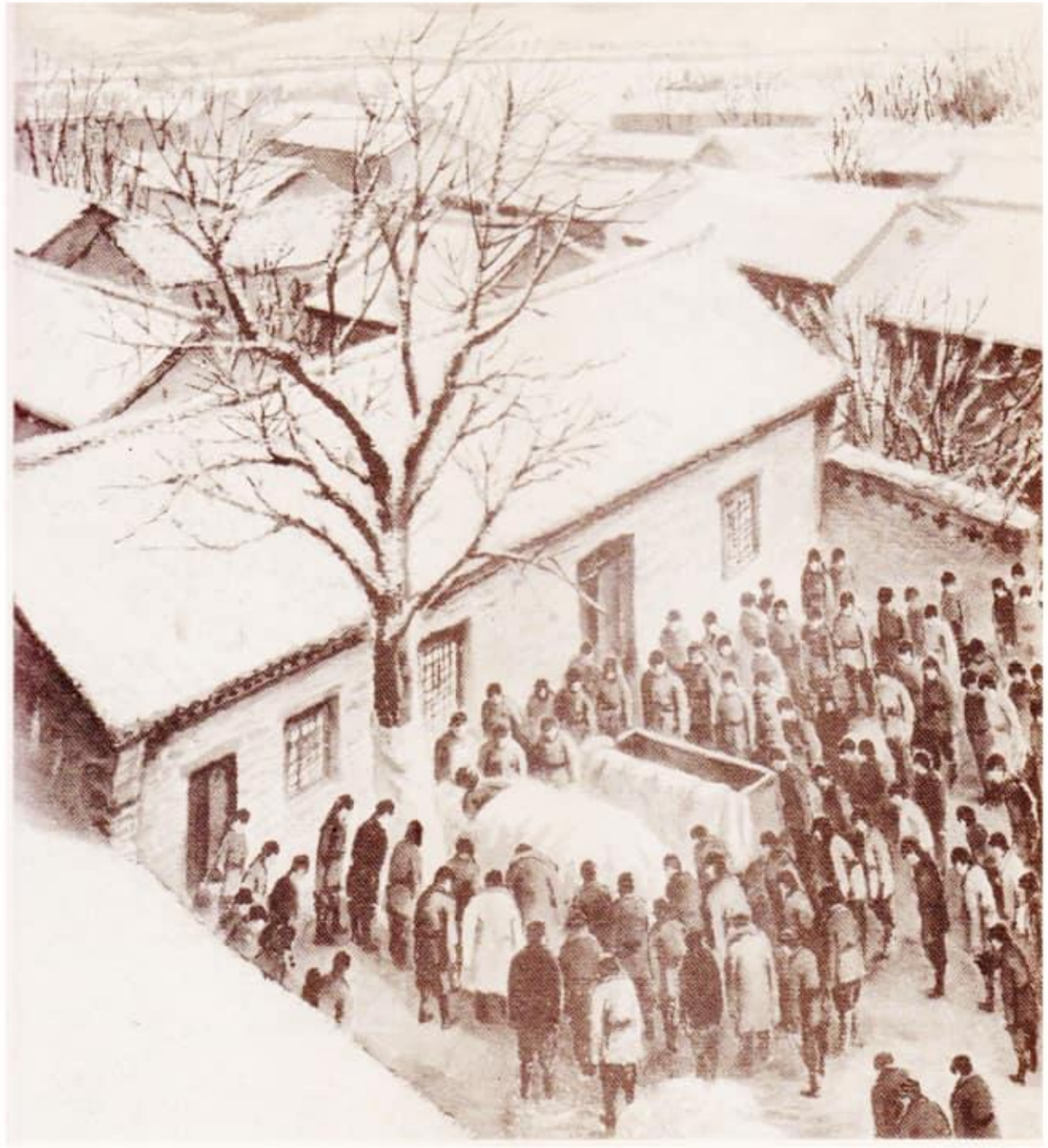
After supper, Kotnis discussed their work with one of his leaders, and then he went back to his writing. He had to blow on his fingers time and again because of the cold.



Kotnis had just written the number 177 on the corner of a page when he fell to the floor. The pen slipped from his fingers, and the pages scattered about him. It was the worst epileptic seizure he had ever had.



When he came to, he saw many familiar faces around him. He tried to sit up and express his gratitude to them, but he was so exhausted that his head kept dropping back. He struggled to say a few words: "Thank you for coming to see me."



All rescue measures proved ineffectual. His precious life was snatched away at 6:15 on December 9, 1942. He left his colleagues, his wife and his 3.5 -month-old son, Yin Hua (meaning India-China). Kotnis was only thirty-two years old when he died.

The people of Yan'an held a Chinese burial ceremony
in honour of Kotnis, and a torn was built for him
under the bombing of the Japanese.

People throughout China were deeply grieved. Chairman Mao Zedong wrote an elegy for him, and Zhu De attended the funeral ceremony in Yan'an and delivered a memorial address. Zhou Enlai and Soong Ching Ling, who were in Chongqing at that time, sent separate messages of sympathy to Kotnis's family and the India National Congress.

In 1976, on the 34th anniversary of his death, Kotnis Memorial Hall in the Bethune International Peace Hospital, of which he had been the first director, was inaugurated. The memory of Dr. Dwarkanath Shantaram Kotnis will live in the hearts of the Chinese people forever.

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